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UNDER PRESSURE

BY

MARCHESA THEODOLI

UNDER PRESSURE

SCENES FROM ROMAN LIFE

UNDER PRESSURE

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BY

THE MARCHESA THEODOLI

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TO

F. MARION CRAWFORD.

THIS my first attempt to describe some of the customs, prejudices, and virtues still subsisting in a portion of Roman society to which I belong by marriage and earliest associations, I wish to dedicate to you.

May it be a grateful tribute to your friendly incitement to write, and to your assurances that my modest essay was not deprived of interest.

LILY THEODOLI.

PALAZZO THEODOLI,
ROME, April 5, 1892.

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UNDER PRESSURE

CHAPTER I

At eight o'clock in the morning, the vast, cold, frescoed hall of the Palazzo Astalli was almost destitute of its usual occupants, consisting of two dignified butlers in black, and several body-servants, footmen and coachmen in green liveries.

Besides these, a whole swarm of elderly dependants of the princely family, who had retired after thirty years of faithful and active service, with their well-deserved pensions, retained the rightful and honourable privilege of returning daily to the field of their past exploits, there to enjoy in unmolested peace a few hours of rest and conversation with the younger servants who had superseded them.

They gathered round the great brass brazier which stood in the middle of the room, and every now and then threw the peel of an apple into the incandescent furnace of burning coals, to perfume the air.

As in most of the typical Roman palaces this antechamber, destined for the sole use of the servants, and the largest room in the building, was decorated with frescoes of gods and goddesses of heroic size, who began their feats of valour or love on a level with simple mortals, and carried them on through the space usually occupied by two stories, round and about the double row of windows, onward and upward to the vaulted ceiling, where they terminated them in a grand Olympic apotheosis.

A row of well-worn, age-blackened, high-backed, carved box-benches stood along the walls and were used as presses by the footmen, who stored their clothes, basins, mirrors, and razors in them, and unblushingly performed their toilette in the hall, as if it were a private dressing-room. A huge canopy of red cloth, on which were embroidered in coloured silks and braids the arms, crest, and motto of the family — an emblem of past feudal rights and princely privileges — occupied a large space opposite the entrance.

There was no other furniture to fill the empty vastness of the gloomy, marble-floored ante-chamber.

The green baize door of this hall, which opened upon the imposingly grand, but very badly kept marble stairs of the palace, was pushed forward and a middle-aged rather stout and dark lady, robed in handsome winter wraps, stepped into the hall.

'I wish to see the Princess Astalli immediately,' she said, addressing herself to that lady's groom of the chambers, whom she espied amongst the two or three footmen in dark green and silver liveries who were standing round the brazier.

'The Signora Principessa never receives visitors in the morning,' answered the man, stepping forward and bowing with the greatest correctness of manner to the lady who had addressed him.

'I know that, Giuseppe,' she answered impatiently. 'You need only tell her that I come on very important business which can suffer no delay, and she will doubtless order you to show me in at once.'

'It is not possible, Eccellenza!' exclaimed Giuseppe, extending his hands in the pose of a martyr. 'You know the rules of this most excellent house, and it is as much as my head is worth to listen to such a proposition. Should I dare to disobey orders, I should lose my place, and I am the unhappy father of eleven children.'

The lady shrugged her shoulders at this pathetic appeal and glanced at the other servants, who were busy in putting a finishing stroke to their clothes after their morning's work in the apartments, and now stood, brush in hand with slightly bent backs, looking at the early intruder with a blank, unsympathising expression.

'I must see the Princess, I tell you,' said the lady in louder tones; and after having waited a moment to ascertain whether some of the bystanders would not be less uncompromising than Giuseppe, she boldly crossed the immense hall and the adjoining ante-room and disappeared in the long line of drawing-rooms as the great oak door slammed loudly after her.

'Now we shall have a fine row with the masters,' exclaimed the youngest and therefore the most imprudent footman of that perfectly well-regulated household.

'Yes,' said another, 'we shall be dismissed, and it is all your fault, Sor Giuseppe.'

'What could I do, mio Dio?' sighed Giuseppe, the unfortunate father of eleven children. 'The Signora Camilla is a great friend of the family, and had I been rude to her or used any violence in turning her away, in all probability we should have been dismissed just the same. Let us hope that she is the bearer of such frightful news that in the general consternation our infringement of the family rules and regulations may be overlooked or forgotten!'

It was a well-known fact, not only to the immediate surroundings of the Princess Astalli, but to all those who belonged to the Clerical or so-called Black party, of which she was an acknowledged champion, that the doors of her old palace were closed in the morning to all worldly or social intruders, no matter how urgent or important their business might be. Not that the intervening hours between the seven o'clock mass in the private chapel and the one o'clock luncheon were occupied in such worldly fri-

volities as the complicated intricacies of a fading beauty's toilette, or the perusal of the morning's newspapers, or the reading of the last sensational-psychological French novel, but simply because it was customary in that family to dedicate those hours to serious occupations and household duties, and any deviations therefrom, no matter how reasonable, when not hallowed by ancient custom, were looked upon as improper. The Princess herself was an elderly lady of severe, cold, unprepossessing appearance, the mother of five grown-up children, and a most worthy highly-respected specimen of that fast-fading type of Roman ladies who were never known to bend, to relent, or to vary their opinions about people or things, no matter what changes took place around them. An early riser by taste as well as by family tradition, she was an energetic person altogether, whose time for over two score and ten years had been scrupulously and mathematically divided into a certain number of equal portions, the order of which was as conscientiously observed by herself, and rigorously respected by the members of her family and household, as the laws of the Church itself.

The early hours of the morning were given to pious meditation, prayer, holy mass, and the supervision of the children's education, in which she took an active part. The remaining time was dedicated to her household duties, with which she interwove those towards the poor and needy in general, and the interests, temporal and spiritual, of the indigent of her own parish in particular. The afternoons were given up, more or less, to the unavoidable social duties of receiving and returning visits, and the evenings to those very few pleasures which were not looked upon as sinful. The mornings alone were considered sacred, and no worldly interests or social motives were allowed to distract the pious and scrupulous lady from her weighty duties towards her family and her religion. Important political events, such as the fall of

the Temporal Power, had convulsed the Roman population, and brought about unforeseen and radical changes in the customs and manner of thinking of the inhabitants of the old city, but even these had not been powerful enough to break through or change the habits of the Astalli. Through endless generations that family seemed to have undergone but slight change, and had suffered no external influences to turn the current of thought of any of its members. Each succeeding princess had, on her marriage, been initiated into the family system, and was expected to respect and jealously preserve it as her predecessor had done before her; and strange to say, thus far none had attempted resistance nor shown the slightest surprise or dislike to the task thus imposed upon her. Such important events as the marriages of two of the daughters of the house, within the last few years, had, it is true, slightly ruffled the still waters of the daily routine, but so soon as the marriage ceremony was over, the even tenor of life was restored, and it again flowed on peacefully and undisturbed.

The Princess was seated at her writing-table conscientiously studying out some household accounts, when the sound of an inexperienced hand attempting to turn the handle of her door attracted her attention. She put down her pen, and fumbled about amidst the folds of her dress to find her eye-glasses.

'Chi è là?' she called out, in a surprised and slightly irritated voice. Receiving no answer, she was about to rise and move towards the door, when the latter opened and admitted the unwelcome visitor.

'Camilla!' exclaimed the Princess, looking at her through her lorgnon with a half-amused, half-vexed expression, 'what a surprise to see you at such an hour!'

She stepped forward with her hand extended to her friend, who stood motionless before the door, abashed at her own boldness in having thus trespassed against the sacred canons of the family.

'What can have happened to bring you here at this hour of the day?' asked the Princess.

'Something very serious indeed,' answered the Signora Camilla, 'or I should never have dared to face your servants, or to push my way unannounced into your presence, because not one of your footmen had sufficient courage to precede me and open the doors.'

'That speaks well for my servants' training,' laughed the Princess. 'I am delighted to hear how faithful and incorruptible they are. But tell me, Camilla,' she added, with a shadow of anxiety in her voice, 'has anything occurred sufficiently grave or important to warrant your breaking into my prison at this unearthly hour? Or is it simply that on hearing the news of the great event soon to take place, your friendly enthusiasm could not suffer delay, and you could not resist the temptation of rushing here at once to congratulate us?'

She smiled complacently as she motioned to her friend to be seated on the sofa, and sat down beside her, awaiting with indulgent pity to hear whatever justifications she had to offer for her intrusion.

'You are quite right as to my enthusiastic delight at this unexpected good news, dear Agnese,' answered the Signora Camilla, 'but it could have been kept within bounds until four o'clock, whereas my motive for disturbing you demanded your immediate attention. The fact is,' she added, with a shade of affected grief in her voice, 'that this great event over which we are shedding tears of joy will never come to pass, but remain a fleeting unrealisable dream, unless you make up your mind to go at once with me to the Convent of the Barberine on the Quirinal Hill in search of Bianca. Before the Ave Maria rings you must let all Rome know that your daughter has returned to her father's roof, safe and unfettered by any sort of religious vow.'

'What do you mean, my dear Camilla?' inquired the

Princess in a low tone, the condescending smile that had been playing about her thin lips suddenly disappearing.

'I mean simply this, that sundry little scandalous rumours regarding Bianca's sudden exit from the world and entrance into the Convent have been floating about like vapour in the air for some months past, and last night, when the great event, as we have called it, was unexpectedly announced, many mammas of marriageable daughters and as many enemies of the Astalli family began to exert themselves to blow the smouldering cinders into a flame and to raise a great scandal. If you are not as keen as a hawk to fasten upon your prey, and turn your enemies' arms against themselves, you will lose it.'

'Forgive me my obtuseness,' said the Princess in bewilderment. 'I cannot seize the meaning of your threats. What has Bianca's monastic vocation to do with——'

'Do you not understand, my dear?' interrupted her friend. 'The world says that you and the Prince are forcing Bianca to take the veil against her will, and that if the evil-tongued, gossiping, curious crowd chooses to whisper a word about your little private family affairs into the willing ears of one or two of the leading chroniclers of our Liberal newspapers, there would appear a series of sensational politico-religious articles, sufficiently disgusting to persuade the patriotic Marquis that it is his duty towards his principles to undo to-day what he did yesterday.'

'But it is all a most hideous malicious lie,' broke out the Princess Astalli, 'and you know that it is!'

'Whether I know it or not, signifies little at this moment, my dear Agnese,' replied the Signora Camilla. 'I have nothing to do with the press, and still less with the Marchese's family, and my intimacy with yours will not stop the scandal that is threatening to destroy your social triumph.'

'Dear Camilla,' said the Princess insinuatingly, 'you

know everybody, you can do almost what you please with people — could you not undertake to clear up this misunderstanding, and put a stop to all this idle gossip before things get beyond a mending point?'

She was a wily woman, and well knew the character, with its faults and merits, of the person to whom she made this flattering appeal. The Signora Camilla Segni was a maiden lady of noble birth, and mistress of a very good fortune, who had preferred to remain a spinster rather than share it with the many dower-hunters who had requested the honour of spending her money for her.

She appeared to be of no especial age; always cheerful and bright, with black hair, sharp eyes, and a rosy complexion which spoke well for the state of her liver. She had managed to solve the problem, so difficult in Italy, where spinsterhood is so little understood or respected. She looked respectably middle-aged while young, and decidedly young when past her forties. Possessing an uncommon share of feminine acumen and vivacity of mind, grafted upon a warm and kindly heart, and supported by sound moral principles, she had retained the love and friendship of her earliest companions, and had become a necessary element of every drawing-room in Rome. Having nothing particular to do in life, with no mental culture, and a horror of books, she had created for herself an infinite number of fictitious occupations which kept her busy from morning until midnight, and as she ingenuously believed, worked her almost to death. What with church-going, visiting of convents, nursing of sick friends, attending afternoon receptions, evening parties, balls, and the like, she bravely filled the twenty-four hours of the day. And when she rested her weary head on her lonely pillow she could boast of having seen and spoken to every man, woman, or child in the city, worth being seen or spoken to. She was universally admitted to be the cleverest hand at arranging marriages,

and loved nothing better than to be the confidante of hopeless lovers or forsaken maidens. No one doubted her great ability at smoothing down the ruffled feathers of jealous husbands, and she loved to preach amiable little sermons on the dangers of fashionable worldliness to the young and inexperienced pretty women in whose morals she thought she discovered signs of laxity.

Some said that Signora Camilla talked too much and made more mischief than she did good. But be that as it may, it was a well-known fact that she was always received cordially by the leading great ladies appertaining to the Blacks, and by not a few of the Liberals, she being herself strangely indifferent to the political colour of her friends.

The Princess Astalli knew her failings and little peculiarities, and in making a direct appeal to her to endeavour to suppress the scandal, which she really did not consider quite so serious as the Signora Camilla was trying to make her believe, she not only meant to pay a compliment, but firmly believed that it was in her friend's power to quiet the storm, and put an end to the gossip at once. But she was mistaken in this; things had gone beyond the Signora Camilla's reach, and threatened to become far more serious than she liked to believe.

'I am quite amazed to see you treat this affair with such inconceivable flippancy,' said the Signora Camilla in answer to the Princess's request. 'You live so secluded from the great movement of social life, that you cannot even fathom the gravity of such an unprecedented scandal in our society. You seem to refuse to believe me when I tell you that all Rome is ringing with the news of Bianca's forced seclusion, and I would not be in the least surprised if the thing were at last to attract the attention of the attorney-general, and if an investigation of the matter were ordered at once.'

The Signora Camilla had the satisfaction of seeing her

friend's face change ominously at this last threat of publicity.

'Do you mean to say that the Italian authorities would dare to meddle with anything concerning a daughter of Casa Astalli?' She fairly gasped as she fully took in the vulgar enormity of her own words.

'They would be only too delighted to have an excuse for poking their noses into one of these old mysterious palaces! You forget, my dear, that these new people do not care a soldo for princes or titled people generally, and will treat you and the most excellent Prince with exactly the same consideration as they would your scullion.'

The Princess shuddered. The times had sadly changed indeed, since a man was no longer master absolute within his own domestic walls.

'What is to be done?' she asked presently. 'How did such an absurd rumour get afloat? Bianca never mentioned to her father or to me that she no longer desired to become a nun,'—then a new thought struck her. 'You go very often to the Convent of the Barberine, perhaps Bianca has said something to you on the subject?'

'Oh dear no,' exclaimed the Signora Camilla hastily, looking away towards the window. 'She never even hinted at such a possibility as that, but she has often, and especially lately, bemoaned the misunderstanding existing between you and her as to the choice of the order in which she is to take her vows. She dislikes the rules of the Carmelites, as you well know, and passionately desires to become a Sister of Charity. In fact I may as well tell you, since you ask me, what I know, that the last time I was at the Barberine Bianca wept bitterly while telling me that the day appointed for taking the veil was fast approaching.'

The Princess sat with bent head meditating profoundly;

like most near-sighted people she did not realise that she was being watched, or that each passing thought reflected in the expression of her face was being analysed by a pair of clear far-seeing eyes. She was fast coming to the conclusion that something must be done at once, not for the sake of the tearful little nun on the Quirinal Hill, nor to silence the idle comments of the town, but to avoid the horrible possibility of an interference of Italian governmental officials in the private affairs of her family, over which she believed her sovereignty by right divine to be unlimited. She was trying to weigh the matter calmly and clearly, depriving it of the well-known exaggerations for which she knew her friend to have a slight propensity. Nor was she wrong in attributing a great deal of the mischief done to that lady's unseasonable zeal. She alone, though unconsciously, had been the cause of the whole explosion.

On her return from her last visit to Bianca, the Signora Camilla had continued to shed tears of sympathy for her little friend in the arms of the two first visitors who happened to call upon her that afternoon, and with flowered eloquence and many gestures she had repeated Bianca's plaintive moaning about being doomed to become a member of a contemplative order, whereas she dreamed of nothing but the hard-working uncloistered communities in which the sisters labour and toil incessantly in the broadsunshiny fields, in cities and towns amidst rich and poor, giving up their lives to the suffering, the needy, and the fatherless. Signora Camilla's friends had listened with breathless interest to the romantic story, and were no sooner out of her presence than they parted to confide it to four other friends, and thus from mouth to mouth in the sleepy idle world, where any sort of news is hailed with delight, the story spread, so distorted and exaggerated that when by evening it again got back to the Signora Camilla, she no longer recognised it as her

own production, and like the rest began to join in the universal chorus of indignation and disapproval.

'I have made up my mind, cara Camilla,' said the Princess decisively, rising to her feet — she was always pompous in her manner of speaking — 'to all those whom you may meet in your daily round of visits, and wherever you may be spending your evening, say that all these rumours about our child are utterly false, and to prove your statement you will add that she is no longer in the Convent; that inasmuch as the solemn day of taking the veil was drawing near, we, her parents, thought it wise to let her go from her own home to the altar, surrounded by the love and care of her family. I will now inform my husband of what has happened, and go at once to fetch Bianca.'

'Well done!' exclaimed the Signora Camilla with great satisfaction. 'Leave it to me to put an end to all these absurd hypotheses. If before night fifty people have not heard the truth from my lips, beginning with the cardinals and ending with the deputies, my name is not Camilla!'

The Princess had no doubt of it.

The two ladies shook hands while exchanging a few parting words, and then moved away in opposite directions towards different doors.

'One word more, cara Agnese!' said the Signora Camilla, pausing on the threshold and turning towards the Princess, who at her call stood still with her hand on the half-open door. 'I may as well tell you that I think it would be a very wise thing if you would profit by this fortuitous circumstance to study and try to understand the heart and character of your little Bianca. The awe in which she stands of you and her father has thus far cruelly sealed her lips. Be kind and gentle with her and she will tell you perhaps of her horror of the convent you have chosen for her.' The Princess drew herself up

very stiffly, and pressed her lips together until they almost disappeared, before she opened them to speak.

'Thank you,' she said briefly and coldly. 'I presume your advice is given in kindness, but my husband and myself feel quite capable of doing our duty towards our children in the future, as in the past, without assistance. It is for us to decide which convent is best suited to those who are blessed with a religious vocation.'

'Oh, very well!' exclaimed the Signora Camilla airily, making a wry face at her friend, who was too short-sighted to see it, but who was conscious, by the sarcastic tone of the voice, that she was being sneered at. 'God forbid my trespassing on the sacred grounds of the family traditions of Casa Astalli! All I can say is that you have collected too many for one family, and they are a very heavy load for poor little Bianca's fragile shoulders — Addio!' And without waiting for the inevitable sharp rejoinder, of the sort which the Princess thought it more blessed to give than to receive, she flounced out of the room and shut the door after her.

CHAPTER II

DONNA BIANCA'S return home was effected with as little stir and noise as possible. The Prince and Princess Astalli drove to the Carmelite Convent, were closeted for half an hour with the Reverend Mother, and then returned to their ancestral home with Bianca seated opposite them. When the door of the carriage was opened her diminutive monastic-looking little figure slipped quietly out and ran up the stairs, past the old porter who held open the glass door, and through the line of servants in the hall, on whose well-trained automatic countenances not a trace of surprise was visible.

In the Prince's private apartment the other members of the family were gathered together, in accordance with orders issued by the Prince before his departure, and there awaited his return with much curiosity.

The Prince preceded his wife, and in as few words as possible informed all present of Bianca's sudden return, which he said was rendered necessary by sundry private reasons, which he did not explain.

When the Princess appeared, followed by her daughter, Don Clemente, the only son and heir of the family, his tutor, the family chaplain, and Mademoiselle Gilberte the governess, all stepped forward and shook hands in turn, and welcomed the pale little person who scarcely dared show her emotion. Lavinia alone, her twin sister, gave free vent to her unbounded joy and unlimited surprise at this unforeseen return, clasping her wildly in her arms, weeping tears of joy, and uttering any number

of those soft endearing terms of which her native tongue can furnish such an endless litany.

Lavinia and Bianca were the last children born to the princely couple, and the twins differed in character as widely as they did in appearance.

While Lavinia's childhood had been one of exuberant health and physical development, Bianca's had been tedious, passive, heavy, and ungraceful. The one nature overflowed with irrepressible vitality, the other was a sad specimen of languid inertness.

In time Lavinia had bloomed forth into a tall beautiful maiden, of strangely perfect features and form, with a complexion of milk and roses, rendered all the more dazzling by the contrast to her glossy jet-black hair, whereas Bianca had remained small of stature, with no sort of features worth speaking of, a sallow complexion, and short curly hair of the colour of dead leaves.

Had it not been for their deep-set almond-shaped eyes, upward curved lashes, and exquisite brows, so exactly alike, no one would have guessed them to be twin sisters. And yet even this resemblance was unstable. The surrounding shadows and the changing hues in the eyes sometimes made them appear quite black and sometimes of a hazel-grey colour. But whether light or dark, according to the fleeting impressions of the moment or the reflection of sunlight, they were very beautiful eyes, and it was impossible to look into their depths without feeling an intense desire to look again.

When the first surprise and emotion of the meeting were over, Lavinia began to wax impatient of the restraint imposed upon them by their parents' presence. She longed to have her little sister to herself, to hear from her all the particulars of the manner in which she had finally succeeded in breaking loose from her conventual thraldom; but neither she nor Bianca dared express their desire openly. The habit of depending on the mother's

guidance even in the most insignificant circumstances made them stand silently before her, awaiting her directions.

The Princess in the meantime was holding forth to her son's tutor and to Don Antonio, the family chaplain, in a high-pitched excited voice, which contrasted strangely with the placid and happy expression of the latter's face. Whatever was the purport of her communication to this old friend of the family, it was clearly more agreeable to hear than to deliver, and her temper was evidently almost as bad as the news she gave was good.

'Signora Principessa,' said Mademoiselle Gilberte, when the Princess paused to breathe, 'may I suggest that the young ladies had better profit by this lovely weather for a stroll on the terrace?'

'By all means,' answered the Princess, turning her head slightly towards the girls as she spoke; 'you may remain there until it is time for Bianca to prepare herself for luncheon.'

Lavinia smiled as she cast her eyes on her little sister's black alpaca dress, a dreadfully shapeless mixture of monastic and school manufacture, considered sufficiently unfashionable even in a convent to be worn by the novices during the months of probation, before being properly robed in brown woollen frocks and white veils. The quaint coal-scuttle-shaped straw hat had fallen far back on her shoulders, and quantities of rebellious little light curls were making desperate efforts to assert their right to shade her brow and tiny ears, notwithstanding the rigorous brushing, the pomatum, and the straightening they had undergone for months.

'It will take me an hour to wash all the grease out of your hair, and curl it as of old, Bianca mia,' she said laughing. 'And as for your clothes, I suppose you have not a decent thing to wear! How we are to manage to get you into one of my gowns is a mathematical prob-

lem I would rather leave to Mademoiselle Gilberte to solve!'

'Never mind about Bianca's clothes, Lavinia,' said the governess, moving towards the place where the two girls stood arm-in-arm. 'Go and enjoy an hour's liberty on the terrace, as the Signora Madre bids you, I will manage to find something decent in which to dress our little Bianca.'

It was one of those glorious February mornings, full of undefined mysterious symptoms of coming spring. The air was pure and sparkling, and the terrace had begun to robe itself in its rich-hued garments to meet the coming season. There was a joyousness, a delight in living, and being able to breathe the soft intoxicating sweetness of nature, that chased from the heart of man all sad forebodings of coming evil and all memory of past sorrows.

On the glossy thick leaves of the magnolias and orange trees the unfrozen dewdrops glittered in the clear sunshine like precious jewels dropped from the divine fingers of some reckless goddess waylaid on her hasty departure from the river-bank before the dawn could appear and spy upon her doings. From the soft sweet earth there arose a heavy scent of germinating spring, and in the shrubberies and shaded nooks the birds tried their little throats in hushed warblings and uncertain trills, against the great day when they would charm their chosen mates with sweet ditties and songs of love. Never before had the familiar old spot seemed so lovely to Bianca. Arm-in-arm with Lavinia, she wandered about amidst the aged trees and flower-beds of the hanging garden, giving herself up to the rare joy of living over again the happy hours of her early childhood. She feasted her eyes on the well-known scene, wondering within herself that it should never before have seemed so lovely to her. The thousand familiar scents evoked the past without its

shadows — for there had fallen many on that young life — even more powerfully than the sight of the trees and the shrubs had done. This beautiful old terrace was certainly the most attractive feature of the Palazzo Astalli, a grand mass of the heaviest Roman architecture, situated in the Via Giulia, between the Farnese Palace, belonging to the kings of Naples, and the Tiber. The long hanging garden ran parallel with the palace and the river, over which it spread its waving green boughs and luxuriant trailing vines. Tradition has it that the founder of the family had originally intended to build a square palace, with a vast court, but when the façade on the street and half of the two wings had been completed, he discovered that the building had proved sufficiently ruinous and grand as it was to satisfy the ambition even of the nephew of a Pope, and instead of continuing it he ordered his architects to complete the harmony of the court by building a colonnade with arches to reach the first story, and to make a rectangular terrace above, which soon became a garden filled with orange and lemon trees planted in huge terra-cotta vases. In time many new exotic plants had found their way into the old-fashioned garden, flower-beds had been made for the different varieties of roses and camellias, which were the fashion of the day, and the old plants had expanded and prospered until their great branches touched and entwined each other.

The two maidens wended their way through the intricate little pathways to the broader alleys beyond. These led to open spaces in which were laid out flower-beds of fantastic shapes, some full of roses, others traced with artful designs in variegated leaves, separated from the fine yellow sand of the pathways by diminutive box-wood borders.

Lavinia pointed out to her sister all the improvements and innovations she had effected since their separation, while Bianca admired and praised everything.

'How hard you must have worked, and how much poor old Angelo has had to do!' she exclaimed.

'Yes,' said Lavinia with a sigh, 'we have both worked many hours a day. It was so dreary to be alone, and the only remedy I could find against sadness was to work with my hands. So long as I was busy I had not time to think. Had I only known that some day you were to come back I would have accomplished as much again! Just come and see my new arbour,' she continued, leading Bianca into a shady walk, made of iron framework and wires, completely covered by honeysuckle, vines, Banksia roses, ivy, and creeping plants of different kinds.

'It is quite marvellous!' exclaimed Bianca rapturously, as she walked down the green alley which ended in a large round balcony hanging far over the water. The railing was of heavily-wrought iron with gilded coats of arms, and when seen from the opposite bank of the Tiber this circular projecting portion of the main wall was like a mediæval tower surmounted by an iron crown.

Bianca stepped forward and leaned over the railing to look down at the water flowing silently at her feet, while Lavinia watched her face curiously and longingly. Bianca seemed so perfectly happy in her present enjoyment and forgetfulness of the past that it seemed cruel to ask her any questions. There would be plenty of time later for an exchange of confidences. As they stood thus in silence, a little door in the wall near them, overlooking the Vicolo degli Astalli, opened, and Angelo, the old gardener, came painfully up the last steps of the winding stairs, dragging a rope and some gardening tools after him.

'My good old Angelo!' exclaimed Bianca, turning away from the river and going towards the round rosy-faced old man. 'I am so glad to see you again, mio buon Angelo!'

He gazed at her for some moments before his age-dimmed eyes fully took in the sweet pale face that was smiling on him, and waiting to be recognised.

'Is this Donna Bianca?' he faltered, still doubting his senses. 'Is it given to me to see my padroncina again before I die?'

'Indeed it is, Angelo,' answered Bianca sweetly; 'and you will probably see me a great many times before you die.'

'Then you are not going to become a nun? Ah! what a pleasure to me, Signorina, to know that you have come home! What need was there, I ask you, of taking you away and shutting you up in the Convent? It seems to me they took you there the very day after your balia was sent back to Vallinfreda, just as the most excellent princes had done with your aunts and great-aunts. Nearly all the principessine degli Astalli have ended their lives in that dreary Convent of the Barberine on Monte Cavallo! Well, well!' he added, suddenly becoming more cheerful, 'now you have at least managed to get out, and may it please the Blessed Virgin not to inspire them to take you back there again!'

He was a simple-hearted, faithful, old servant, who had been in the family over fifty years. His ideas did not extend beyond the walls of his small flowery kingdom; but he was true and good, and he would have willingly laid down his life for those two little ones, as he called them in his heart. When he had seen Donna Lavinia come to her gardening alone, morning after morning, during the previous year, her great sad eyes red with weeping and her heart too full to speak to him, he knew well enough what had happened.

'It is the old story over again,' he would mutter; 'we have buried alive another principessina.'

More than half a century earlier he had heard how the sister of Prince Oddone, the twins' grandfather, had become a Carmelite at the age of fifteen because the man she was to marry, although she had only seen him twice, fell into the well of his house in Perugia and was drowned;

and how, twenty years later, two of the present Prince's sisters had entered the same convent, and he had never seen them again. Donna Bianca's turn had now come, but he did not ask himself if it were right or wrong, nor how it came about that these facts were repeated in each succeeding generation. All he knew was that it grieved him that it should be so, and he felt himself too old now to love new things or new faces. In his youth he had probably never loved anything but his terrace; later he had loved the family collectively, not individually, but as old age crept on he became aware that he had a soft spot somewhere in his old heart, and he began to love those two little ones with all the concentrated devotion and reverence of which his nature was capable.

It had grieved him sorely to see the gentle little figure moving no more amidst his magnolias and myrtle trees; and when he realised that Bianca had actually broken through the stern barriers of the household traditions and returned again to the world, his surprise and joy knew no limits. He could not recall one instance in the olden times of a daughter of the patrician families coming back to her home when once she had begun her noviciate. He had indeed heard the Convent gardeners say that many were discontented with their lot, but that was an old story of some forty or fifty years ago, and probably most of them were dead now, released from their bondage, and enjoying in Heaven their dearly-bought liberty.

In those days children were too submissive to their parents' will, too fearful of creating a scandal, or bringing comments on their family name, of which all were so jealous, ever to draw back when once they had chosen their destiny — or rather, when their destiny had been chosen for them.

'Madonna Santa!' said old Angelo, 'how did you manage to get out, Signorina? and what is going to happen next, I wonder?'

'I got out because mamma came to fetch me, but she gave no reasons for doing so. And nothing is going to happen, my good Angelo, just yet. What more could happen?'

'Sì, sì,' replied the gardener, nodding his head backward and forward and looking very knowing; 'why should they have brought you out of the Convent if *they*,' he motioned towards the Princess's room, 'had not found something better than the Convent for you, Signorina, just as they have found for Donna Lavinia?'

'What has been found for Donna Lavinia?' asked both girls in the same breath.

'Oh, I was only making suppositions,' answered Angelo hastily. He was becoming aware that he had already said too much, and if the Princess caught him talking of anything besides his terrace to her daughters she would give him a piece of her mind, and he knew by experience that when his noble mistress was in a temper she was more dreadful than an equinoctial storm. So he quickly gathered up his gardening tools and took himself off to his work.

'Can it be true, Sorellina, that you really do not know why they took you out of the Convent this morning?' asked Lavinia, when they were again alone.

'I assure you, dear, I know nothing whatever about it! Papa and mamma appeared at an unusual hour, had a short conversation with the Reverend Mother, at which I was, of course, not invited to assist, and after that I received orders to follow them, which I did joyfully, without ever turning my head to look back! Very few words were spoken by either on our way home. I was most curious to know what it all meant, but, of course, I dared not ask any questions.'

'Of course not,' said Lavinia with conviction.

'You know as much as I do about it now, dearest. I scarcely dare tell you what I hope!'

'I know, I know!' exclaimed Lavinia. 'It is that they mean to let you become a Sister of Charity.'

'Oh! if it were only true! The Signora Camilla promised to help me. She came to the Convent the other day and I opened my heart to her, and with more emphasis and stronger language than I ever dared use before, I told her how I detested that cloistered life and how utterly unbearable it had become.'

'They said they did not mean to force you to take the solemn vows, but hoped that the charm of peaceful silence and meditative solitude would grow upon you.'

'Indeed it has been quite the contrary! While the nuns chanted the Hours in the choir with that dreadful nasal voice they use so as not to tire their lungs, or knelt for hours searching in their pious meditations to find the exact place destined for them in Heaven, I dreamed of battle-fields, searching for the wounded of the victors or the vanquished where they lay side by side in the midst of marching troops, the firing of guns, the rumbling of cannon. At other times I would fancy myself wandering about the streets of some plague-stricken Eastern city, or in the hospitals, where in long lines of spotless beds poor sufferers were groaning and calling to me for comfort and help. I longed to be up and about my Heavenly Father's business,' she continued impetuously, 'treading the squalid districts of the great thoroughfares in search of the sick, the hungry, the oppressed — trying to soothe each infirmity, helping the weak to bear their burdens, comforting the lonely, taking care of the poor little orphan children, feeding and nursing them, teaching them to sing sweet songs, and at night tucking them into their little beds with a mother's kiss and a mother's blessing! That is how I passed my time!'

'Such arguments may have convinced the Signora Camilla,' observed Lavinia doubtfully, 'but the question is whether they are strong enough to bend mamma's will.'

'The greatest difficulty was to get out of the Barberine,' replied Bianca. 'Now that I am free, no persuasions of father or mother will ever induce me to go back there again.'

'Would you dare to say such things in our parents' hearing?' asked Lavinia in amazement.

'I mean to tell them the exact truth without further delay or phrases. These months of absence from their immediate influence have strengthened instead of diminishing my resolution; the justice of my cause will sustain me through the ordeal.'

'Oh, Bianca!' exclaimed Lavinia, with clasped hands, 'I fear you think yourself stronger than you are, and then, when the time comes, you will yield again.'

'Never!' cried Bianca. 'I am no longer the little girl they led away a year ago. Should they try to force me into doing what I believe wrong, I will rebel, even were I to die in the struggle.'

'Hush! Sorellina, hush, for God's sake!' said Lavinia hurriedly, her cheeks turning white, and the hands that sought Bianca's trembling. She instinctively turned her eyes in every direction, dreading to detect some one hidden in the garden who might have overheard Bianca's treasonable speech. 'If it be true that some day you will speak thus to our parents, warn me in time of the coming storm, that I may run and hide in the farthest corner of the house, where there will be no danger of seeing papa's eyes at that moment, nor of hearing mamma's voice!'

The foundation-stone of their education was paternal authority regarded as a direct emanation from God. It was absolute, unflinching, eternal; the entire edifice of Lavinia's principles and beliefs was therefore shaken to its base by her sister's sudden rebellion. Bianca's words would have sounded just and reasonable to any one else, but to Lavinia they meant nothing short of high treason,

and she stood dazed and horror-struck as she fathomed the depths of misery in store for her sister.

Just then the door of the library at the end of the long arbour where they were standing was opened by the Princess, who stepped out and began to look for her daughters through her long-handled lorgnon. With a smiling face, strangely in contrast to their pale cheeks and startled eyes, she beckoned to them, and stood awaiting their approach. Both advanced with reluctant steps. Bianca meant to be very brave, but she was none the less frightened for all that.

'Bianca,' said the Princess when they were within speaking distance, 'you may go to the study, where Don Antonio awaits you. Your father and I wish to speak to Lavinia alone.'

'To me!' exclaimed Lavinia in unfeigned surprise, and a little examination of conscience was rapidly made to discover of what delinquency she had been guilty since sunrise. Finding nothing to cause uneasiness, and her mother's face still showing signs of unusual good-humour, she followed her not altogether unwillingly up to her father's writing-table. The Prince's library was like most libraries in the Roman houses. The chamber contained large carved book-cases full of old Latin works, collected by all the ecclesiastics of the family, but which nobody ever read; here and there marble busts of mustachioed, military-looking cardinals, and one of heroic size of the Pope of the family. The carved fireplace with its marble seats filled one end of the room. A few heavy inlaid tables with massive objects of art in gilt bronze, alabaster, and marble, were placed at regular intervals down the centre of the room — one corner alone seemed inhabited, and there the Prince was seated at his writing-table. The room was never heated save by the kindly sunshine that streamed in through the French windows opening upon the southern wing of the terrace,

for he, like all his contemporaries, believed that fires caused bad colds, and were only to be tolerated in the Princess's private apartment, where he was never to be found, except after the eight o'clock dinner.

He was a tall thin man with regular features, but an ill-shaped head, entirely bald, save for a fringe of white hair which depended just above his high shirt-collar. Notwithstanding a heavy white mustache, which helped to hide the severe lines of his mouth, his expression was icily cold and hard, and unpleasant to look upon. His eyes were extremely small and of a yellow shade, the only redeeming quality of his countenance being their sincere and bold expression. One felt at once that no matter how relentless and even cruel he could be at times, he was at least true, and that a man with that steady look in his eyes could never tell a lie.

Lavinia stood before him, nervously twitching her hands, her lovely face expressing mixed perplexity and fear. Neither of her parents seemed willing to break the silence, each waiting for the other to speak first, while Lavinia's heart sank lower and lower.

The Prince at last, seeing that his wife, though only too willing to hold forth on most occasions, was now perversely silent, forced her to speak.

'My child,' said he, 'your mother has a very important communication to make to you to-day. You must listen to her.'

'My dear Lavinia,' said the Princess with an air of importance, 'you will be eighteen on your next birthday, and we have decided that henceforth you shall dine at our table. We make an exception in allowing you to appear in the drawing-room a few months sooner than was permitted to your elder sisters.' The Princess coughed. She evidently did not know how to come to the point.

'Thank you, mamma,' murmured Lavinia.

'And you will wear your white woollen gown which was made last year for your presentation to the Holy Father. Tell Mademoiselle Gilberte to see that your braids are properly pinned up on your head, instead of hanging down to your knees as at present,' and the Princess smiled blandly as she glanced at the two heavy plaits. 'Your father thinks I had better inform you that you are betrothed.'

Lavinia's heart gave a great thump in her breast, and then stood still. All the blood had suddenly left her face. She was to be married, then! What news for Bianca! Old Angelo the gardener was right when he said that something had been found for her. It did not strike her till long afterwards how absurd it was that the fact should have been talked of in the servants' hall before she herself had been made aware of it. How she longed to know who he might be, what he was like, where he came from! She wished Bianca had been there with her newly-acquired courage, to ask those questions she dared not formulate. Her lips moved, it is true, and her mother, who had stopped in the middle of her sentence when she saw her child's colour come and go so painfully, seemed to be waiting to catch her words. But none came. She stood motionless, with resolutely downcast eyes.

'Yes, my dear child,' resumed the Princess, 'you are engaged to be married, and your betrothed is coming to dinner this evening with his father. We are most anxious that on this happy occasion you should look your best. Now come to us, my dear daughter, and let us bless you.'

Lavinia bent over her father's hand in the act of kissing it, but he gently drew her to him and lightly touched her forehead with his cold lips. Her mother next embraced her with quite a little show of affection. When this ceremony had been duly gone through, Lavinia

stepped back and again stood before them, as if expecting some further information. She vaguely hoped they would tell her something more about the man she was to marry, but both remained silent.

'May I retire, mamma?' she asked humbly at last, losing all hope.

'Certainly, my child,' replied her mother. 'You have our permission to impart the joyful news to your sister and to Mademoiselle Gilberte. Your father announced it officially to all our relations last night. We have still to regulate many important matters regarding your marriage and future establishment, and as you have nothing to do with such serious questions you may as well go to your room at once.'

When Lavinia was fairly out of her parents' sight she ran as fast as her little feet could carry her through the many drawing-rooms and passages which led to the girls' apartment, in search of her sister.

In the meantime Bianca was seated at the great old oak table, where many generations of female Astalli had taken their lessons, beside Don Antonio, the chaplain, who was listening with undisguised satisfaction to her version of the morning's proceedings. Years of steadfast devotion to the family had made him as dear to all as if he belonged to it by right of birth. He had been the Prince's tutor when both were young, and when he himself was studying canonical law to become a priest, and after the marriage of his pupil, he became the family chaplain, and taught the little children their catechism and their Latin. Every one loved and respected him, even though his ideas were often at variance with the family dogmas, but his life was so pure and his tastes so simple, that no matter what might be his manner of thinking, all agreed that there never was a better nor a more trustworthy man.

'I wish,' concluded Bianca with a sigh, 'that mamma

had called me instead of Lavinia, to tell me that I might become a Sister of Charity to-morrow!'

'That would be a very hasty decision, it seems to me,' rejoined Don Antonio with a grave smile. 'Last year I remonstrated on the ground that you were too young to become a member of any sisterhood, because you were only seventeen, and this year I should make the same objection because you are barely eighteen.'

'Your objection is a very poor one, Don Antonio,' said Bianca impetuously. 'Is it not you who teach us every day that the Lord loveth the first-fruit of the earth, before it grows old and decays? Do you really think it an imperfection to follow one's calling in the full bloom of youth?'

'My child,' replied Don Antonio, 'I think that loneliness and solitude, united to exalted piety, are evil counsellors for one so young and inexperienced as yourself. The unsympathetic life of the schoolroom first, and the rigid austerity of the Carmelite Convent later, would naturally inspire an enthusiastic nature such as yours to do wonderful things in the field of religious action. You should beware of all fanaticism, and try to know something of the world you are so eager to renounce before you make your final resolution.'

'Try to know something of the world!' broke out Bianca, greatly scandalised. 'Would not that be very wicked? And why should you tell me to go into the world and learn its evil ways, when you never advised my sisters to do so before marrying the husbands that were found for them? Why should I, who have chosen to be the bride of a Divine Spouse, be subjected to such a fearful ordeal, when it was spared my sisters, who after all only married men of the earth, earthly? Am I not from my cradle the chosen of the Lord?'

Don Antonio sighed and answered nothing. What could he say, after all, that would not shock the maiden's delicate ears?

'The chosen of the Lord, indeed!' he said to himself, as he cast a glance at the pale interesting face, with the great innocent eyes. Those last words of Bianca recalled to his mind her childhood and girlhood in its different phases, and how from her infancy she had been taught by her parents to look upon herself as blessed with an especial religious vocation.

Though they scarcely would admit such a thing even to themselves, by a tacit understanding Bianca had been chosen as a holocaust because she was very plain and unprepossessing in appearance, and offered little chances of drawing a prize in the matrimonial lottery. Ladies of her rank were not expected to remain in the family as old maids; with a few exceptions they generally withdrew into convents. To make the task easier, perhaps out of kindness of heart from their mistaken point of view, Bianca had constantly been told that God loved her better than the others, and that she had been especially chosen by Him. Whenever there was a sacrifice to be made for another's pleasure, all turned to Bianca, of course, as the proper person to make it. She firmly believed that she had to follow her Master by a steep and thorny path, such as the others did not think themselves called upon to tread. She was all spirit and soul, and very little body, and she had decided that if she became a nun it was to work — and to work hard — when she set about it. The kindly old priest had watched with sorrowing eyes the occult and impalpable influences which had been brought to bear on her character, and which had led her far beyond her parents' religious aspirations. He feared that when she became a woman, instead of the inexperienced child she still was, she would see life differently, and that it would then be too late for her to change her mind.

Lavinia's hurried footsteps were heard without, and Bianca, forgetting her own troubles, rose hastily to meet her.

'What was it all about?' she asked.

'A marriage! Sorellina, I am to be married. It is all arranged and was announced last night to all our relations. I am sure it is some very splendid match, for papa and mamma actually kissed me! yes — they kissed me — both of them, and smiled all the time. And, oh Bianca! he is coming this evening to dinner with his father — and I am to have my hair pinned up on the top of my head — and I am to wear my white dress made for our especial audience of the Pope before you went to the Convent. I am to dine at papa's table, and am not to be sent off to bed — and ——'

'Lavinia, my child!' exclaimed Bianca, 'for Heaven's sake, take time to breathe if you do not wish your soul and body to part company before you have seen your betrothed!'

'True!' gasped Lavinia, as she sank exhausted into the nearest chair.

'Now that you are rested, tell me all about it,' began Bianca after listening for several minutes to her sister's hurried breathing.

'There is nothing more to tell,' answered Lavinia despondently.

'What! Did not mamma tell you his name, at least?' Lavinia shook her head. 'Where he comes from — if he is rich and noble?' continued Bianca.

'She told me nothing, Sorellina,' answered Lavinia; 'and not being as brave as you I dared not ask a question.'

'I suppose not,' said Bianca, looking disappointed. 'Well, pazienza! we shall know all about it this evening, and perhaps you will manage to find out from somebody who made the marriage. I wonder if it was the Signora Camilla? Mind you wake me up when you come to bed to-night.'

'Never fear, sweet one. By the bye, where is Made-

moiselle Gilberte?' she asked, her excitement returning at the thought of the great news she had to give to the faithful old governess.

'She and Don Antonio went out of the room together as you came in. I will go and call them.' But Bianca did not go. She raised her voice and called loudly, 'Mademoiselle Gilberte, Mademoiselle Gilberte!' That venerable monument of intensified respectability started violently and almost crossed herself in horrified surprise at being thus rudely apostrophised through the open door by her placid little Bianca.

'Mademoiselle Gilberte!' again screamed Bianca, 'Lavinia is going to be married immediately. You are to see to her having her hair piled up on the top of her head in the shape of a Chinese pagoda so high,' — she stretched her arms at full length over her head. 'She is to be robed in the stately pomp of pontifical vestments, — to dine with her elders and betters, — not to be sent to bed at all, — and to be allowed to gaze for hours upon her future father-in-law and his son.'

'Beware, Bianca,' cried Lavinia, laughing at her sister's loquacious enthusiasm. 'If you do not stop to breathe, you will expire in your turn before you hear your future brother-in-law's name.' Mademoiselle Gilberte considered this no laughing matter; and she frowned severely as she entered the girls' room, and found them both in high spirits, and ready for any sort of frolicsome joking.

'I am surprised at your levity, my children,' she said with dignity; 'this is a very serious matter, and should be treated with all due solemnity and gravity. I am deeply impressed by this especial proof of God's mercy to you, my dear Lavinia.'

'I should not consider it an especial blessing to be married to a "provincial,"' said Lavinia irreverently, while she returned her governess's kiss. 'I would rather

be married to a chimney-sweep in Rome than to a Conte of the provinces with ever so many square miles of landed property, like Adele's husband. But of course it is not ours to choose, and we must take what is given to us, and be grateful. After all, anything in the shape of a husband is better than the convent.'

'That depends upon the convent,' put in Bianca, staunchly standing up for her own flag.

'Mademoiselle,' said Lavinia, her voice softening suddenly, and her eyes filling with tears, 'you must pray very hard for me, and ask God to bless this marriage. I feel very anxious, I dread the unknown future.'

Mademoiselle Gilberte put her arms round her, and for one brief moment pressed her warmly to her heart. She was not given to much outward manifestation of her feelings, but Lavinia knew her well, and her silent caress conveyed comfort and courage to the girl's agitated heart.

Her fate was being decided by others without her intervention, within a few steps of where she stood, trembling and uncertain. They had taken upon themselves to sacrifice her to family considerations as though by right divine, as Abraham sacrificed Isaac, and to wed her for weal or for woe to a man utterly unknown to her. Unwittingly her heart rebelled against this sacrifice, though she knew not that she had a right to interfere. She felt troubled and anxious, and she even reproached her conscience for being wanting in the free abandonment of self-will, and the unmurmuring submission to parents' decisions, which distinguished the maidens of her caste from the vulgar Roman females who chose their husbands for themselves.

She was neither completely satisfied with this state of things nor positively refractory. She was simply puzzled and unhappy, and too ignorant of the ways of the world to explain them to herself.

The two girls were again alone and sat perfectly silent, busy with their several preoccupations.

'I wonder,' said Lavinia, pursuing her thoughts aloud after a long pause, 'what my sposo is like? Will he be handsome, manly, brave? Will he be kind? Oh, God! Suppose he were to be unkind to me — ignoble — brutal — what would become of me? What do you think about him, Sorellina? Has he ever seen me, I wonder? Have I ever seen him? Can it be possible that his father and ours have agreed to marry us without his acquiescence, just as papa has decided my fate without consulting me?'

'I do not think that this is done nowadays, even in our society, for the men,' answered Bianca. 'I rather fancy it is more probable that he — whoever he may be — has seen you and sought your hand in marriage. It may be that you have met in some drawing-room, and that he has expressed to his father his desire to marry you — unless the Signora Camilla discovered him in some town, and pounced upon him as a good match for her friends' daughter.'

'Ah, Bianca dear!' exclaimed Lavinia, 'do not spoil it all by telling me that the Signora Camilla has unearthed some rich idiot — perhaps from some place in the mountains of which we have never heard — and that she has been clever enough to make our mother think that only such a marriage can bring me perfect happiness! That would be too bad! In a few hours I shall know the truth, whatever it is. Till then, let me believe that the man I am to marry is a Roman — and all that I mean by it — and that he has chosen me for his wife because he thinks me worthy of his name, and — and — I may as well say it — that he loves me!' She blushed deeply as she finished speaking. Bianca did not conceal her amazement.

'How can you say such startling things? They are positively improper!' she exclaimed.

'They may be absurd, they may even be improper,' rejoined Lavinia, 'though I am not at all sure of it, but somehow I cannot but feel, far down in the depths of my heart, that to love and be loved by the man one is to marry is neither ridiculous nor improper.'

'We never heard Costanza or Adele speak of loving their betrothed,' observed Bianca.

'We were silly children when they were married,' replied Lavinia, 'and it would have been strangely out of place for them to speak to us on the subject. What do we know of what mamma said to them when the marriage contract was signed and duly registered? Perhaps they were bidden to love their future husbands just as much as they chose. My instinct tells me that this man to whom I am engaged cares for me, and that I am going to — to love him with all my heart.'

'What an absurdity,' remonstrated Bianca, 'to imagine that a man could care for a woman to whom he has never spoken!'

'Why do we care for people at all?' asked Lavinia. 'Do we know whether their hearts are true and good? Do we not judge them by the expression of their faces? My betrothed may have seen me somewhere and believed, in the innocence of his heart, that I was a good girl and likely to make him happy, and he may have chosen me in preference to many others because he fancies I have fine moral qualities. It may be,' she added doubtfully, 'that he has taken a passing fancy to me. That would be what they call a caprice, would it not?'

'And very reprehensible,' rejoined Bianca solemnly. 'I have heard that those idle fancies for women are very wicked, and lead to all sorts of evils if not promptly crushed in men's hearts. Do you remember what Adele said to us one day when we were laughing at Gianluca's peculiarities? She reproved us, and said that in choosing a husband one should only consider the beauties of the

soul, and those worldly advantages absolutely inherent in our caste, for the sake of the children; and that when one sought personal satisfaction in the good looks of one's future husband, one was sure to be bitterly disappointed in after life.'

'Well,' said Lavinia with a faint amused smile, 'according to her doctrine there is no doubting that Adele's marriage is a happy one, and made in Heaven! Now I would rather that my marriage were made on earth, and not to please the angels. How am I to know if my taste agrees with theirs? After all, it is I who am to live with the man, and not the angels. If they do not like him they have nothing to do but to spread their great bright wings, and return to some pleasant Heavenly abode, whereas I must stay with my husband for half a century, perhaps. Just fancy spending fifty years with Gianluca!' she exclaimed laughing, as the image of her uncouth brother-in-law rose in her mind.

'You seem to forget Adele's sublime virtues,' said Bianca, slightly shocked at her sister's irreverent mirth. 'Just think of all the treasures of patience, longanimity and self-sacrifice she has stored up in Heaven!'

'That may be all very beautiful, but I would prefer to think that the man who marries me will make me happy in this life, rather than to believe that marriage is only to give me an opportunity of storing up treasures in Heaven! Now, in my case, he may have seen me in the street and said to himself, "She is a stranger to me, and yet I care for her." Do you understand, Sorellina?'

'Indeed I do not!' answered Bianca, shaking her head. 'Do you perchance think that you love him?' It was terribly embarrassing to them both to be thus conjugating the verb to love, and they blushed as they smilingly looked into each other's eyes. 'You do not know him, therefore you cannot love him.'

'There I have you, Sorellina!' exclaimed Lavinia,

delighted to argue the point. 'If he loves me enough to ask for my hand without knowing me, then I can well love him without ever having set eyes on him.'

'Dearest sister,' said Bianca anxiously, 'are you going mad?'

'Not yet, Sorellina. I am perfectly logical in my reasoning. If he loves me, I love him — is that clear?'

'It is at least conditional,' laughed the little sister.

'Yes,' replied Lavinia, 'I feel I am loving some one conditionally, because I cannot help it — and still I long to love him — I have gone so far, though I am blindfold, that I feel I must needs go to the very end of it all and find out for myself all the joy and the pain of it. How can I explain to you the queer workings of my mind, my poor little nun! Such strange thoughts and new feelings! They crowd my mind and confuse me, and I cannot understand them. You are a little saint, and should be able to prophesy my life. Look at my star and tell me what you read in the future.'

'I see just as clearly and as much into your future as I do into my own,' answered Bianca, 'but with this difference, that in a few hours you will be able to form a pretty good idea of what awaits you, at least humanly speaking, whereas God only knows when I shall be able to say as much about my own fate!'

'Do you think they will allow him to speak to me this evening?' asked Lavinia, her thoughts returning incessantly to the great event of her life.

'I fancy so. What harm could it do you or him?' asked Bianca.

Thus the two sisters sat together for hours confiding their troubled thoughts to each other, trying in vain to unravel the complicated sensations of Lavinia's heart. Neither of them had enough experience of life, or knowledge of the world, to understand what was coming to

pass around and within them, or to solve problems which had puzzled older and wiser heads than theirs.

A strange psychological phenomenon was taking place, which would have filled Prince Astalli with dismay had it been brought before him. Notwithstanding that he closed the great doors of his palace to all free-spoken men of modern opinions, forbade the introduction of all new books, magazines, and newspapers, and guarded his daughters like ancient vestals, Lavinia had become a woman of her own times, utterly unlike her mother, who stolidly continued to be a woman of the past.

This unexpected betrothal had suddenly developed Lavinia's dormant capacities. Unconsciously she was beginning to think and feel as did the women of her day; to formulate nobler and freer aspirations, to dream of more romantic possibilities, such as had never troubled the peaceful slumbers of her elder sisters.

It seemed as if the air in which she moved had fashioned and modelled her under its imperceptible pressure, according to the ideas of her contemporaries, of which she was entirely ignorant, and for the first time in her life she began to think alone, and realise that her heart could never have been cast in the same mould as her mother's. The new events in her life were changing the current of her thoughts with startling rapidity, and with each hour mother and child were drifting further and further apart.

Some twenty minutes before the appointed hour for dinner, the Princess Astalli entered her boudoir and sat down in dignified expectancy of her guests' arrival, in her favourite arm-chair, beside a low table on which burned a huge oil lamp with a soft yellow silk and lace shade. She wore her best gown, and her grey head was decked with masses of diamond flowers, interwoven with artificial green leaves.

It was a quaint old room, over which two centuries

and more had passed unawares, leaving it just as Cardinal Astalli, Queen Christina of Sweden's protector and protégé, had made it, to receive his august friend and guest.

The hangings were of pale, faded, green silk. Four very large family portraits hung on the walls, so high as almost to touch the deep painted frieze, and below, within reach, were rows and groups of miniatures and pastels, in elaborate gilt frames much tarnished by age. The curtains were of thin silk of the same indefinable yellow-green colour as the damask on the walls, bordered with a microscopic gold fringe. There were no white curtains. The ceiling was divided into four equal parts by rafters heavily gilt and ornamented; the intervening space was painted to represent the sky with clouds of different shades, varying from the dark grey to the pale pink, in which twelve ruddy cherubs, each bearing in hand one of the signs of the zodiac, were joyously disporting themselves.

The solid furniture was of the same epoch, consisting of high-backed gilt chairs, carved pier-tables of variegated marbles, on which stood brass candelabra and ebony clocks looking like small models of cinquecento architecture, with their diminutive statues of angels and saints in carved ivory.

This drawing-room was commonly called the 'Princess's boudoir,' because she usually occupied it of an evening, when not expecting visitors, though it was some ten yards square.

She had had the good taste to fill the centre of the room with comfortable modern furniture, choosing amidst the different specimens those colours most in harmony with the faded tints of the walls, and these she had artfully divided into comfortable little nooks and corners, by the aid of Louis Quinze screens and masses of rhododendrons and azaleas in full bloom.

There was not a 'bibelot' to be found in all her apartment.

Lavinia on entering kissed her parents' hands, and said 'buona sera' to her brother, a pale-faced youth of twenty summers, very much like his father in build and manners, with a slight black mustache and beard, and then sat down on a low seat beside her mother. She carried upon her arm a large blue plush bag from which she extracted her crochet needle and her work, and soon was busy, seeming to all appearances perfectly calm and indifferent to what was going on around her. The Princess raised her eye-glass and examined her daughter critically and calmly for some moments. The result of her inspection must have been satisfactory, for never before had Lavinia looked so lovely. The excitement she was bravely mastering gave an extraordinary brilliancy to her complexion, and her deep long eyes, notwithstanding the shadowing of the curly thick lashes, glanced with an unusual fire. The shining black braids were fastened rather far back on her shapely little head, and formed a dark rich diadem. Her low brow, untrammelled by little curls or waves of hair, according to the fashion of the day, showed in all its exquisite purity and breadth. She reminded one of a Madonna of Murillo.

The white woollen gown, the first she had ever owned, made by a good French dressmaker, moulded perfectly her exquisite young form, and fell around her limbs in heavy folds to the ground.

The servant opened wide the drawing-room door, and Lavinia's heart stood still as she listened intently to catch the name of the guest who was being announced.

'Conte Borelli, Signor Veri,' drawled the man, as he drew back to allow the visitors to pass, and Lavinia heaved a great sigh of relief. So unbearable was the suspense and the dread of knowing her fate, that it seemed almost a blessing to have the ordeal put off for a few moments longer.

She remembered then that it was Thursday, on which

day these elderly bachelors, who formed part of her mother's little court, usually came to dine and play whist with Prince Astalli afterwards.

But her 'fate,' as she called it, was not far off; again the door was thrown open, and the servant announced with a loud and unusually solemn voice —

'Il Marchese Casale di Vallinfreda — Don Uberto Casale.'

The Princess rose to greet these new guests with extreme cordiality, and turning to Lavinia, who stood pale and trembling by her side, presented her to her future father-in-law. Before she had time to make her curtsey her hands were seized by a military-looking little man, rather stout, with a large head covered with thick white hair, a white bushy mustache, and deep flashing black eyes. He gave vent to his delight at having such a beautiful daughter-in-law in loud, cordial, and emphatic expressions, and showed his evident wish to take the abashed maiden in his arms and give her a fatherly embrace. But the icy atmosphere of the surroundings was sufficiently impressive to dampen the demonstrative enthusiasm even of this fearless old man of the world, and he had to content himself with looking at Lavinia fondly, while muttering all sorts of complimentary little exclamations.

Lavinia looked smilingly and fearlessly back into his eyes. His frank courteousness and open-hearted cordiality had won her heart at once. But her thoughts were elsewhere. Immediately behind him stood her mother talking to Don Uberto, and in another moment she knew he would be brought up and presented to her. She was too much agitated to reason with herself or collect her thoughts. She felt rather than saw that he was a very tall slender man, with a flowing fair beard and fiery dark eyes like his father's.

'This is Don Uberto Casale, your betrothed, cara

Lavinia,' said the Princess, as she presented him to her.

He bowed low, and as he stood up to his full height their eyes met. In that brief instant she realised that his bold penetrating glance had looked her through and through, and an emotion of intense joy, such as she had never experienced before, swept over her. In fluttering haste she lowered her eyes, and dared not raise them again. She did not understand what was passing in her girlish heart as she stood there motionless, while the man she was to marry watched her intently, although chilled by the rigid ceremony which pervaded the atmosphere; but he dared not speak to the woman who was already his promised bride.

Happily, dinner was announced almost immediately. The Prince drew near to his daughter, and led the way with her through the dimly-lighted halls to the dining-room, followed by the Princess leaning on the Marchese Casale's arm. Last of all came Uberto and the two old bachelor habitués.

CHAPTER III

To the old Romans, who held staunchly to their unflinching clerical principles — and they were very many — to be an Italian patriot was to be a traitor, a conspirator, and a subverter of all moral principles.

They acknowledged no difference between the Utopian, who aspired to the Unity of Italy as an expression of modern liberty and the equality of man, and the vulgar popular agent of the revolutionary party, who hesitated at no baseness, was capable of using every sort of lawless and iniquitous means to achieve his political intent; who was always fishing in the troubled waters of anarchy and revolt, spreading dismay and horror amongst those very Italian brothers for whose liberation so many Italian parties had united.

There were countless examples of sincere and noble-minded promoters of these new ideas, who had been drawn into the active party, and had acquiesced, though unwillingly, in the use of unworthy measures, because they seemed indispensable to the furtherance of the so-called cause of liberty; and such instances had justly confirmed the uncompromising Romans in their belief that, for all promoters of Italian Unity, the end justified the means, however unlawful such measures might be, and however offensive to the ideas of a truer liberty.

The Marchese Casale di Vallinfreda was a Roman patriot in the full meaning of the word. Having espoused the cause of the Liberals in his early youth, he had exposed his life as freely as he had given his money to sustain it.

Being by nature impetuous, enthusiastic and very credulous, he had often been a tool in the hands of unscrupulous partisans, and had to pay the penalty for misdeeds which he would have indignantly refused to perpetrate.

When the ideas of national freedom and popular government began to take a more concrete form in the southern Italian states, the Marchese Casale left Rome and joined the local revolutionary party, becoming at once, by the force of his persuasive eloquence, his wealth, and the prestige of his name, one of the most dangerous supporters of the subversive doctrine. In Naples, where the revolution was painfully making its way by means of secret societies, conspiracies, and associations of very doubtful moral character, the Marchese suddenly found himself brought to the front, hopelessly compromised by his patriotic brothers, pursued by the authorities, and in imminent danger of being shot for high treason in the Fort of St. Elmo. Such had been the fate of many patriots under the famous Cardinal Ruffo scarcely a century ago, and such might have been Casale's end had he not found safety in speedy flight by a fishing-boat, which landed him near Cape Circello, on the coast of the Pontifical states. He wisely concluded that the safest refuge for him was in his own beautiful palace in Rome, where his position and powerful connections, added to the Pope's known magnanimity and fatherly forbearance towards all Roman noblemen, would protect him from further pursuit.

But soon the passion for plotting and conspiring in the furtherance of his one great ideal again seized him, and he was arrested by the secret Papal police with several other well-known enemies of the government and locked up in a state prison. Pius the Ninth, being rather fond of the fiery impetuous Roman, who had once been his friend, could not be prevailed upon to subject him, like

the others, to a regular trial, and simply exiled him from the Pontifical states.

Casale di Vallinfreda withdrew to Bologna, where he owned a palace and a good deal of property, leaving his only son Ferdinando, a puny child of four years, whose mother had died at his birth, to the care of an elderly sister. This lady, whose time was passed in going to church and in all sorts of charitable works, took good care of the little nephew entrusted to her, and no pains were spared to bring him up in the true old Roman style, with a horror for all modern ideas or Liberal innovations, and in all things as diametrically opposed as was possible to his 'poor father,' as the Marquis was commonly called by the family. In time the patriot's passion for political intrigue waxed cold, and his home, far away from his relations and the friends of his youth, became daily more lonely and unbearable to him. He thereupon decided to marry again, and chose a beautiful girl some twenty years younger than himself, but who loved him as dearly as if he were still in the full bloom of youth, and changed his desolate home from the dark prison that it was into an enchanted Eden. Uberto was the child of this marriage. When he began his studies at the University of Bologna, this portion of the Pontifical states had long since been annexed to the kingdom of Italy, and the great political questions which had convulsed his father's youth had become events of the past, almost forgotten in the peaceful provincial city, and baldly recorded in the annals of history.

While still in his teens Uberto became deeply interested in the social-philosophical questions that were threatening the equilibrium of society. He fell in with a set of young men whose democratic socialistic maxims, 'à la Tolstoï,' far exceeded those of the most rabid democrats to be found on this side of the Alps. They usually met in a cold bare room, smoked very bad tobacco in

penny pipes, and held forth for hours on the equality of man, the obligation of hard labour equally proportioned amidst all mankind, and on the sweetness of bread earned by the sweat of one's own brow. They thundered against the vileness of ill-acquired hereditary wealth, and made poor Uberto feel thoroughly ashamed of his ancestors and worldly advantages. These and many other socialistic absurdities, bawled forth for weeks by fanatic unreasoning socialists, ended by making a deep and serious impression on the young fellow's mind.

He resolved one day to put into practice those beautiful humanitarian socialistic theories; to abandon the luxuries of his present life and to work like the poorest. In order to accomplish his purpose he quietly left Bologna one morning without informing any one of his intentions.

His father, who had been a man of action rather than a man of study, used to laugh at these philosophical propensities, and thought little at first about the matter. But as the number of friends increased who came to ask for Uberto, he began to think it was time to set up an inquiry as to his son's whereabouts. He had never been very severe with Uberto, many of whose absences were of a nature which he could not well confide even to his father; when this was the case, he had generally let fall a careless word which had prevented the Marchese from being uneasy. But on this occasion he had slipped away secretly, leaving no address, and had been absent for three weeks without giving news of himself. The Marchese made up his mind to go quietly to the Chief of Police, whisper a word in his ear, and leave it to him to unravel the mystery.

After three days a detective presented himself at the Palazzo Casale, and informed the astonished Marquis that his son was in Milan, working in a printing office under a false name, dressed in a working blouse, and earning four lire a day. He had taken a room in one of

the poorest quarters of the town, and his conduct in all respects was most exemplary.

The old gentleman was simply annihilated at this extraordinary communication. He knew that his son had no debts, that he had more money than he could spend, and from the last particulars it was absurd to suppose that his strange escapade was in any way connected with an affair of the heart.

Not wishing to share his paternal anxieties with the detective, who stood watching him narrowly, he dismissed him with an ample reward and many compliments and thanks to the Signor Questore, and proceeded at once to make a minute investigation of Uberto's room, hoping to discover there some clue whereby to unravel the tangled affair. Nor was he mistaken; on perusing the titles of the books which Uberto had left strewn about in every direction, he found that they were all works regarding the social question, and many of them were full of notes scribbled on the margins, showing that they had been read and studied seriously, perhaps for months. He pondered long over this curious manifestation of modern philanthropy which had developed itself in such an original fashion in Uberto, and wisely decided to let the juvenile ebullition work itself off. He knew Uberto's refined tastes too well to doubt that this foolish experience was the best possible antidote for those high-flown theories which disturbed the young man's mind, and he waited patiently, and not a little secretly amused, for his son's return.

He was certainly a Liberal, but by no means a Radical, and perhaps when compared to what the Liberals have become to-day by the inevitable unfolding of human thought, he might pass for a Clerical. The advanced principles frantically embraced by Uberto were very distasteful to him, and he fought against them in his family and immediate surroundings, as his father had

fought against those which finally led to the Unity of Italy. He believed that this strange experience would cure his son of his infatuation more completely than all his preaching.

Uberto in the meantime worked on bravely, trying hard, but in vain, to make theory harmonise with practice. The ordeal was fearfully painful, as one by one his illusions about the sacredness of manual labour and the glories of shared poverty vanished; and after a few weeks of heroic effort he gave it up in disgust, and returned to his home, completely cured of his democratic mania.

The Marquis received his son with a smile of welcome, delighted at heart to see how efficaciously the antidote had worked.

He pretended to believe the little fib Uberto had invented for the occasion, asked no questions, and nothing more was ever said between them of this juvenile escapade.

Thus much has been told to show what was Don Uberto Casale's character at the age of twenty; and though many years had elapsed since, bringing with them besides experience a great amount of accumulated depth of character and strength of will, in his heart he still nurtured a sympathy for those ideas that had charmed his youth, and there were still to be found vestiges of that daring enthusiasm which had prompted him in the sacrifice of all things in pursuit of what he believed to be right.

The Marchese Casale then wisely concluded that the time had come for his son to try his wings, and having filled his pockets with money he bade him learn life for himself in the great and varied world. And Uberto had done so by going to India in pursuit of a golden-haired woman, and to America to study the institutions, people and customs of the great fairy-land of business. During his absence his mother died, and his father, now a broken elderly man, decided to abandon his second home, full of

the sweet memories of the wife he had so dearly loved, and return to live in Rome.

The gates of the Eternal City had been opened these four years to exiled patriots such as he, and Uberto had repeatedly tried to persuade his father to take up his abode in the new Capital; but he had refused to do so, alleging as his reason that political party feeling was still raging too fiercely, and that he was waiting until time and habit had allayed the feelings of his many Clerical relatives, who looked upon the Liberals with deep hatred, and still considered the Italians as conquerors who had invaded their country.

The two brothers, united at last under the same roof, had few sympathies in common, and the contrast between them was very striking. While deploring many of Uberto's wild ways, his father loved him for his free open-hearted nature, so different from the self-concentrated, narrow-minded, parsimonious character of Ferdinando. He would say with a sigh that it was the women who made his boy so wild and reckless — a danger which Ferdinando had escaped by conscientiously marrying a rich, good, and extremely plain wife the day he was one-and-twenty. Now and then an echo of some of Uberto's love affairs would reach his father and disturb his peaceful old age, and he had already begun to resign himself to the possibility of dying before seeing his younger son mend his life, when Uberto suddenly staggered him by a proposal to marry Donna Lavinia degli Astalli.

His surprise increased on learning that his son was in love with the young girl; that for months he had been watching her and following her about, studying her character in her lovely face, and had finally made up his mind either to win her for his bride or else to leave the country, enlist in some foreign army, or start on an expedition for Central Africa.

He had led a very fast life since he had come to Rome,

and this in itself was sufficient reason to make him fear that the Princess Astalli, fully au courant of all the little scandals of society, would hesitate to give her daughter to a man who had had so many adventures, and had never been thought of as marriageable by Roman mothers.

Don Ferdinando's wife, who was a distant relation of the Princess Astalli, and as unflinchingly Black as her husband, was chosen by the Marchese Casale and Uberto as the proper person to open the preliminaries, and ascertain if the latter had any chance of succeeding. She was told to use all sorts of persuasions, and was hastily despatched to the Palazzo Astalli on her important mission the day before Bianca returned from the Convent.

Contrary to their forebodings, she found the way extremely easy; the Prince and Princess Astalli smiled graciously on her, blandly helped her to get over the most difficult portion of her proposals, and sent her home with cordial assurances of their consent to treat of her brother-in-law's marriage to their daughter Lavinia.

They fully appreciated the worldly advantages of such a marriage, and so far as regarded Uberto's rather fast reputation, they tried to make their minds easy about it by assuring each other that Lavinia would convert him, that they would pray very hard for him, and recommend him to the prayers of all the dear good souls of their acquaintance. Such an event was sure to cause an immense surprise, to say the least, to all the Black party. It was the first marriage of a Liberal to a daughter of one of the Clerical families that had as yet taken place since the Italians had entered Rome; and they knew that under the cover of political principles, many petty jealousies would have full play, and perhaps dear friends with intemperate zeal would interfere and make mischief, because their own daughters had never been asked in marriage by rich noblemen belonging to the Liberal party. Hence the Princess's hasty decision to withdraw

Bianca from the Convent, which she would have disdained to do under other circumstances, no matter what the world said. But just now she feared this might be her one vulnerable point, and if, as had been suggested by the Signora Camilla, the newspapers should get ear of the thing, and make disagreeable remarks about the high-strung antiquated principles of the Astalli family, the Marchese Casale di Vallinfreda, and perhaps Don Uberto, might think it wise to decline the alliance.

Could they have only known that Uberto had chosen the girl because he loved her, that he was entirely indifferent as to what they, or all the world at large, might say and think, and that if they only gave him a chance, he meant to win her for himself by sheer strength of loving, perhaps things would not have gone so smoothly for the poor little timid Bianca.

This marriage seemed to cause infinite satisfaction to both families. The Marquis was delighted to see his son's wings clipped. Don Ferdinando and his wife Donna Matilde had shaken in their shoes for years in anticipated anguish, lest Uberto should some day bring home to them a beautiful forestiera as a bride, full of new fantastic ideas, educated in that free way in which girls were said to be brought up in those new countries beyond the Channel or the Atlantic Ocean, who ride Irish hunters and give little dinners three times a week, and are said to care generally more for men's society than for that of pious matrons. A daughter of the great Roman house of Astalli could but be born and bred according to their own ideas and aspirations; her theories and principles of life in general, and her education in particular, would be exactly like theirs, and they counted on Lavinia's influence to bring Uberto, the black sheep, back into the temporal and spiritual fold of Holy Mother Church.

Donna Matilde's visit was immediately followed by that of her father-in-law, who made his formal request

for Donna Lavinia's hand for his son, which was accepted by her father in terms equally formal and ceremonious. These two elderly gentlemen differed on all points except their aristocratic family customs and princely social traditions. It would have been impossible for them to meet and discuss any subject save the one which had unexpectedly drawn them together. They were both complete specimens of a fast-declining race — one the stiff unyielding type of autocratic paternal authority, as holy and incontestable as the supreme power of the Pope; the other the dare-devil, enthusiastic, warrior-champion of complète liberty and affranchisement from all antiquated prejudices, and himself a factor of the Italian Unity. It was agreed between them that the young people should meet for the first time at dinner on the following evening, and that this family meal should be followed by a reception, to which should be invited all the many relatives of the two families, to the third degree of relationship included.

The dinner on that eventful evening was cordial and the conversation spirited. It was no subject of surprise to the guests if the daughter of the house sat mute with downcast eyes. Young ladies in such Roman houses are not expected to take an animated part in the conversation, or even to understand the half of what is being said around them. The Princess Astalli always showed to her best advantage when seated at the head of her own table. Having learned early that she was irremediably plain, she made up her mind to make the world forgive and forget her ugliness in the charm of her conversation and brilliant wit. Hence it was that she enjoyed the reputation of being one of the cleverest women in Rome. Her sayings were often repeated from one drawing-room to another, and they were never found to be so witty as when covering a thrust at some one to whom she owed a grudge.

Uberto alone of those who were expected to sustain the conversation sat silent and preoccupied, his powerful brow slightly clouded, and his manner distant, when not absent. His father looked at him several times in surprise, wondering within himself how it could be that Uberto, who was usually so overflowing with life and conversation, always delighting to raise a discussion which he loved to sustain, whether he was convinced of his own hypothesis or not, by the most absurd paradoxes, had suddenly lost the use of his very brilliant and attractive qualities when it seemed to the old man that he most needed them, and had the best reasons for making use of them.

Now and then Lavinia felt that a sudden glow of warmth pervaded her whole being, like a ray of tropical sunshine, as, looking up, she met the quick deep glance of Uberto's brown eyes. Then her head would sink lower on her bosom, and the sweet-scented flowers, the silver candelabra with their wax lights, the porcelain and sparkling glass that decorated the table, reeled in hopeless confusion, completing the great chaos of her thoughts and feelings. She was scarcely aware of what was going on around her, but she mechanically did as others, helping herself to food she barely touched, and longing intensely for the dinner to come to an end, that she might run away somewhere and be alone with her thoughts.

At last the Princess rose, and, followed by her guests, moved into the library for coffee and cigarettes. Shortly afterwards, the butler having announced that other guests were arriving, the whole party followed the hostess into the large drawing-room, which was only used on state occasions. It was an immense hall, hung with dark crimson damask silk, and full of pictures of all schools and epochs. Two large pianos stood in the middle of the room, half hidden in a forest of blooming plants, and innumerable low easy-chairs and sofas were tastefully grouped in every direction.

Instead of joining the little crowd which instinctively drew near to the great wood fire on that chilly February night, Lavinia turned to the left on entering the door, and disappeared behind a large back-and-gold Japanese screen. She sat down beside the round table just behind it, on which there was a collection of Chinese puzzles, and absently took up one and began playing with the coloured ivory rings.

The sound of Don Uberto Casale's voice reached her ears, and her hands fell listlessly to her knees while she listened intently to what he was saying. Suddenly he ceased speaking, and his tall figure emerged from behind the screen into the full light of the lamp by which she was seated. Though she lowered her eyes, she knew that he had taken a small chair and was drawing nearer, evidently intending to sit down beside her.

Her heart began to beat violently. She was so frightened that she knew not what to do, while he, seeing her confusion, only smiled, and seating himself, rested his arm on the table and his head on his hand before speaking to her. He understood at once that she felt that this meeting behind the screen was slightly improper, and the fact that she had unwillingly become his accomplice in this little infringement of etiquette created a secret bond between them which would help to break the ice.

'Signorina,' he began in a deep voice that shook slightly, 'Prince Astalli has conferred a great honour upon my family in deigning to accede to my father's request in granting me your hand.' Lavinia bowed slightly, and he pursued. 'To complete my happiness, however, it is not sufficient that our parents should agree to this marriage; I must have your free consent from your own lips, untrammelled by the outward influences or worldly considerations which your father and mother might bring to bear on your decision. May I dare hope, Signorina, that you will not withhold it?'

'Signore,' she replied timidly, but with much dignity, 'I will do whatever my parents bid me.'

'That is exactly what I do not wish you to do!' exclaimed Don Uberto impetuously. Then, seeing her surprised, disturbed look, he became conscious of the want of form in his hasty exclamation, and the breach of etiquette in thus addressing a young girl.

'Pray forgive me my impetuosity, Donna Lavinia,' he said presently, trying to master his emotion, 'but I feel so deeply in this matter, strange as it may seem to you, that I cannot express myself in those set phrases which I suppose would be proper on this occasion. The truth is,' he added hurriedly, bending nearer to her and unable to restrain his words — 'my happiness depends upon your answer, and nothing could make me more miserable than to think that you accept me because your mother bids you to do so! I have been a very wild fellow, Donna Lavinia,' he continued deprecatingly, 'and I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garment, much less to raise my eyes to one so beautiful and good as you; and yet, even while knowing this, I have dared to do so. I have built you an altar in my heart and have adored you there — longer than you can guess.'

'How could you do that, Don Uberto,' inquired Lavinia, 'when you did not know me before this evening?'

'May I tell you how it came about that I knew you months ago? And how, after much suffering and torturing doubts, I succeeded in making my way towards you, and am finally here beside you at last?'

Lavinia bowed her head in silent consent, and watched Uberto with shy wondering eyes, while he told her the story of his love.

It was the old story of love at first sight, and he told of his impressions, his past sufferings in his doubts as to the sincerity of his feelings, of the battles he had sustained against himself, and of that final surrender of his

whole being to the mastering love for her. He spoke in simple words, but with the warmth of a lover eager to touch the heart of the woman he loves, and Lavinia, in her inexperience, listened to the gentle tale in a rapt ecstasy. It was to her the rending of the cloud which had thus far hidden from her the springs of her aimless, nameless, girlish aspirations — her inexplicable longings for she knew not what, and her melancholy hours of blank abstraction. She suddenly became aware that this was what she had wished and sighed for, and the reality appeared more beautiful than any heavenly vision she had read of in her sacred books.

Uberto told her all the story. He had seen her in the Via Nazionale. He had been fascinated by her grace and by her deep eyes. He had followed her and learned her name from a passing acquaintance. That was the beginning.

For days the image of the beautiful girl haunted him; and do what he would, he could not banish it from his memory. The desire to meet her again became so intense that he found himself one morning walking up and down the lonely Via Giulia in front of the Palazzo Astalli. The next day, and on many succeeding days, he was forcibly drawn in the same direction, and before long he discovered to his dismay that this unusual manner of passing his time was the only occupation in life which gave him the least pleasure.

By constant watching, he soon learned the habits of all the inmates of the gloomy old Palazzo. The Prince was very methodical. No sooner had his carriage driven out of the stables into the court than he descended and drove away. The Princess Astalli ordered her carriage at three o'clock, but it generally waited an hour. As for Donna Lavinia and her governess, they went out regularly every day for a walk at two o'clock, and returned at four — except on Sundays and Thursdays, when she drove with

her mother. In a few weeks he knew all her favourite resorts, — the churches where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for the Forty hours, and where she went daily; as well as the names of all the old beggars who sat on the steps of the churches and sang her praises, calling her by her name, as she went in or came out.

Don Uberto Casale gave up hunting on Mondays and Thursdays, for fear of losing a glimpse of her. He forgot his horses, his books, all other women, and even his music, of which he was so fond, to dream of the beautiful girl to whom he had never spoken.

There were days when his dreams were far from pleasant; when he fought violently against what he called his incomprehensible folly — days of gloomy reaction and of revolt against such useless madness.

Then he upbraided himself for behaving like a silly schoolboy, repeating again and again that there was no excuse for allowing himself to be mastered by such an obsession, and with desperate effort he tried to wrench himself free. In his attempt to regain his liberty of heart and mind he returned to his old life, took up his usual pursuits, and laughed at his infatuation. But it was of little use. No sooner was he on horseback, determined to ride thirty miles before returning to Rome, than a gnawing fear seized him lest in his absence some other man should have found his way into the old Palazzo to make a formal and successful request for Donna Lavinia's hand. Then he would gallop back to the city as fast as his favourite horse 'Spilla d'Oro' could carry him, to resume his watch in the Via Giulia, where he was infinitely relieved and almost surprised to find that the palace walls wore the same sleepy look as ever, and that nothing extraordinary seemed to have taken place within during his absence.

At last he could bear it no longer. He acknowledged himself conquered, went to his father and told him of his

love, and notwithstanding the little probability he foresaw of being accepted, he requested the Marchese to make the formal proposal of marriage as soon as possible.

'You see, Donna Lavinia,' concluded Uberto, 'that if my father has asked your hand for me, it is not for any worldly consideration on his part, but simply because I loved you, and I will not be accepted upon any other condition. I love you, Lavinia, as I never loved in my life before, and I must win your love in return for mine.'

He smiled, and looked into her grey eyes in a way that made her hastily lower them.

'Lavinia,' he resumed very gravely after a moment of eloquent silence, 'if you feel you can never love me — do not marry me!'

She tried to speak, but no sound passed her lips. Perhaps his words, however plain and clear, were so far beyond the usual range of her thoughts, that her inexperience prevented her seizing their full meaning just then. Perhaps, too, though she felt their meaning, she could not find words.

Of one thing only she was fully conscious at that moment — of her own supreme, boundless, unutterable happiness.

It filled her heart and her mind and shone in her great luminous eyes as Uberto looked into them, and in her fair face, where he read the great metamorphosis wrought by love in her soul.

His heart like hers was full to overflowing, and they were both carried away far beyond the realities of life, forgetting the world in which they lived, and to which they were chained by so many petty miseries and conventionalities.

Neither Uberto nor Lavinia, as they smiled and looked into each other's eyes, remembered the reason why they were in that stately drawing-room, amidst the lights and flowers and perfumes of a worldly gathering, in all its

splendour and pomp. They had forgotten that many immediate social duties awaited them, that the numerous relations and guests were fast arriving and spreading about the room in little groups to talk of the great event, while trying in vain to get a glimpse of the happy pair.

After a while surprised glances, followed by a shake of the head and a smile, were cast towards the corner of the room where the two lovers sat, in blissful unconsciousness of what was going on around them, utterly irresponsible for their very incorrect behaviour.

With that strange intuition which very experienced hostesses acquire by the constant habit of receiving, the Princess Astalli began to feel that something was going wrong somewhere in her gathering. She looked about her several times uneasily, changed her place, and finally having raised her eye-glasses and inspected each group, she discovered what was the matter.

At the opposite end of the room the tea-table stood in dignified solitude. Lavinia's chair was empty, and the great Russian silver samovar sang a cheerful accompaniment to Uberto's idyllic love-song, while Lavinia listened in rapturous silence behind the Japanese screen.

The Princess rose hastily and moved towards the place where the truant lovers were sitting. She was a clever woman of the world, with plenty of experience in such matters, and in one glance at Lavinia's perturbed face she understood that Uberto had been making love to her. But what filled her with boundless dismay was to read on the latter's countenance ill-concealed signs of something very like emotion.

'Casale has not been losing his time!' she said to herself in disgust as she interrupted the compromising tête-à-tête, and bid Lavinia go to the tea-table and attend to the wants of her guests. Then, looking hard at Uberto, she continued her soliloquy. 'Well, well, are we going to have a love-match in Casa Astalli?'

She laughed inwardly at the thought, though when she sat down by Don Uberto Casale there was a very ominous frown on her face. She meant to say something rather sharp, for to her antiquated ideas nothing could be more reprehensible or lacking in good taste than a show of sentiment in young people engaged to be married, and she thought it most advisable to nip any sentimentality on Uberto's part in the bud. But there was something almost haughty in his face which forbade her speaking, and she felt a certain awe of him as she realised that he was not one of those with whom a liberty could be taken, as his friends and acquaintances very well knew. His manly dignity made him a favourite with men older than himself.

It was far from agreeable to Uberto to see the elderly lady seat herself in the very chair Lavinia had just vacated, but he consoled himself with watching her graceful movements as she went about the room, offering the little cup of tea to each of the guests, and accepting with timid curtseys the loud congratulations of all the uncles, aunts, cousins, and particular friends. The Signora Camilla had the most to say on the subject, and Lavinia listened to her with a more willing ear, and returned her kiss all the more cordially, since she believed she had contributed to her sister's return from the Convent.

'The tiresome old frump!' muttered Uberto irreverently, gnawing at his mustache, and feeling very much like throttling his future mother-in-law. 'I should not complain, however,' he added philosophically; 'I have made love to her with all my heart, and I have had more than a man's share of happiness!'

They sat in constrained silence for some time. An impalpable animosity was rising between them, like those artificial clouds of steam which hide the stage from the spectator during a change of scenery. She was thinking

of her child's future, and trembling with fear at the idea of Lavinia becoming so soon the legal property of such a man as Casale. She dreaded the months of betrothal, inevitable now, during which he would assuredly offer a formidable opposition — none the less fierce because occult — to all the ideas and principles she had incessantly instilled into her child's heart. In a few moments the several currents of their thoughts had carried them miles away from each other, as so often happens in the world, and finding no common interest to bring them together again, Uberto rose, bowed to the Princess, and joined the group of men who stood near the entrance.

Towards twelve o'clock the guests had all departed, save a small group of habitués, to whom the Princess offered cigarettes.

Professor Tosti sat down at the piano, and began humming one of his last songs.

'Signora Principessa,' he said presently, interrupting his song but continuing to draw faint chords from the keys of the piano, 'have you ever heard Don Uberto Casale sing?'

'No, indeed!' exclaimed the Princess, 'I was not aware our friend was gifted with that accomplishment.' She smiled incredulously. Romans are generally merciless to musical amateurs, and have little tolerance for those who produce themselves in public, unless they be as thoroughly trained and as gifted as professional artists.

'It makes me sad and angry to hear him sing, Signora Principessa,' continued the sympathising Maestro, with a look of envy and admiration at Uberto, who had slyly found his way back to Donna Lavinia's side. 'Such a voice, such facility, such talent, Signora Principessa mia! And to think that such a gold mine is buried in the throat of a man born too rich ever to need it!'

'Will you sing for us?' asked the Princess, turning towards her future son-in-law.

'Subito!' exclaimed Uberto, rising and moving towards the piano without affectation. 'I love to sing. What Tosti says may be quite true, and I have often been rash enough to wish that circumstances had forced me to make use of my voice.' He looked over the different books of songs, and having found what he wanted placed it on the piano before the Maestro.

'What are you going to sing, Don Uberto?' asked the Princess rather absently, seating herself on the sofa beside her daughter.

'An old song I find amongst your music,' he answered with an odd smile that would surely have aroused that lady's suspicions had she not been too near-sighted to perceive it. 'It just suits my voice, and my present turn of mind.'

Scarcely had the first notes passed his lips when every one in the room turned to listen with intense surprise. It was one of those full mellow voices that flow without effort, like a rippling brook on a mountain side, one of those thoroughly Italian voices that speak of love and passion, and make one dream of the sweet tender spring, with its perfumed flowers, and the great secrets of awakening nature — voices not rare amongst the people in our sunny land, and which make the romantic northerners who visit us believe that the souls of Italians are for ever overflowing with poetry and harmony.

Uberto had sung from his childhood with passion, and one could at once detect that his naturally beautiful voice had been carefully cultivated.

It was a popular ballad he sang, in that very rapid nervous measure natural to all Italians when singing the songs of their own country, and differing so immensely from the measured sentimental time adopted by the Anglo-Saxon admirers and interpreters of popular Italian music.

Uberto looked at Lavinia while he sang, and by poetry and music, the two sweetest messengers of love, he once more tried to make her feel the depth of his passion.

'Dear child, because men say your face
Is lovely with an angel's grace,
Your maiden fancy on white wings
Soars heavenward, seeking heavenly things.
Yet love shall open your heart's eyes —
In this old world you so despise
All is not weeping and despair.
God lends earth joys sublimely fair
Angels may envy.
You cannot dream them yet, dear child,
But when you wake from slumber mild
To meet the kisses of first love,
All earth below, all heaven above,
Shall ring with song and blaze with light
And breathe sweet odours of delight —
Thy heaven shall be this earth, sweet child,
This earth thy heaven.'

Lavinia sat transfixed, her whole soul, as it were, melting in the sweet harmony of the music. Her thoughts only vaguely caught the meaning of Uberto's words, but her entire being, spirit and body, realised at that moment the fulness of life, and gave form to her feelings.

As with a magic wand, he had initiated her into those joys sublimely fair which angels indeed may envy — she vaguely dreamed of the sweetness of kisses given and received — of the great breath of delight that seemed to sweep over earth and change it to Heaven.

Many a truly tender womanly heart has lived, loved and ceased to beat without ever tasting of the joy that fell to the young girl's lot at that moment.

The Princess coughed uneasily and turned towards Lavinia. When by a side glance she became fully aware of the extraordinary effect Uberto's song had produced on her daughter, who was too innocent and inexperienced to conceal the emotions that were filling her young heart, the Princess thought it high time to put a stop to such startling novelties.

'Oh, what shall I do with them!' she groaned to her-

self. 'All this is too shockingly dreadful! You may retire to your room,' she said to Lavinia, before the last notes of the accompaniment had died away.

Escaping from the enthusiastic demonstrations of delight which were showered by all present upon him, Uberto managed to reach the door as Lavinia was gliding over the threshold.

'Buona sera, Donna Lavinia,' he whispered, looking into her lovely shy eyes and pressing her little hand.

'Buona sera, Don Uberto,' she replied smiling. 'Thanks for that lovely song!'

'Did you understand the meaning of the words?' he asked eagerly.

'I think so,' said Lavinia, blushing deeply, and looking down at the carpet.

'And do you understand that the day has come for you to wake from the sleep of childhood — to live and to love?'

'I — I think so,' she faltered, smiling and suddenly looking into the depths of his eyes, her hand still in his.

'The future is ours, amore mio,' he murmured passionately, 'and we will make the angels envy our happiness.'

She moved on, and he watched her until the last shadow of her tall and graceful form faded away in the dimness of the many succeeding drawing-rooms.

As he returned to the group of people who surrounded the Princess near the piano he ran his fingers several times through his short, dark, brown hair with the unconscious automatic movement of one in a dream. He was trying to steady his heart and his thoughts. He felt like one stunned, or drunk, and he scarcely knew where he was or what he was about.

'Your singing is really very good, Casale,' said the Princess in cold measured tones, which brought Don Uberto at once to his right senses and to the reality of things, 'but your song was scarcely adapted, I should say, to maiden ears.'

'And why not, pray?' asked Casale recklessly. Just at that moment nothing could have pleased him more than to draw his future mother-in-law into a violent discussion — one of those Italian pastimes in which every one screams, glares, gesticulates and looks as if he meant to devour somebody, until all ends with a shrug of the shoulders and a broad laugh at any one so naïf as to believe that either of the disputants could be sufficiently in earnest to 'make bad blood,' as they call it, over the subject discussed. Uberto Casale owed the stately Princess a grudge for sending Lavinia thus hastily off to bed, and he heartily despised cant and affectation, as he irreverently denominated the pious prejudices of the world to which he belonged by birth. Within the last twenty-four hours he had caught himself several times looking forward with grim satisfaction to the time when he could dare freely to express his opinions to every member, old or young, of the Astalli family — a thing no one had ever yet attempted since the Italians had entered Rome.

'If Donna Lavinia is old enough to be married,' he said in answer to her observation, 'she is surely old enough to know the meaning of love.'

'A properly educated young lady should never know anything about such love as you sang of just now,' answered the Princess sententiously; 'and if more of the young men of our society would take the trouble to keep their young wives in perfect ignorance of such sentiments as you chose to express in music to Lavinia, it would be all the better for their personal happiness and family honour.'

'Do you seriously mean to tell me, Princess, that you believe it sufficient for you to ignore the subject in order to prevent your daughter, or any other girl of her age, from fathoming the mystery?'

He laughed, and he looked out of place in the midst of

those men, who were all, young and old, in the habit of bending their heads to whatever the Prince or Princess said.

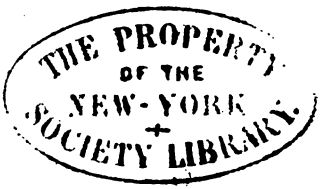
'Of course I do!' exclaimed the Princess Astalli, ignoring his laugh. 'I never dreamed that such a thing as love (as you understand it) existed till three years after my marriage, when a dear friend confessed to me that she loved a man who was not her husband. I wondered that the earth did not open then and there and swallow her in her wickedness!'

'You have become slightly accustomed to such things by this time, I should think,' laughed Uberto.

'Yes,' she replied stiffly. 'But my experience in such matters has not shaken my belief that the safest plan to preserve a young woman from the universal contagion is to let her ignore the very existence of love.'

'And I would not marry a woman whose purity was bought at such a price!' broke in Uberto. 'My taste may be perverted according to your standard, but when I marry I want my wife to be perfectly capable of loving me with all the weakness, unreasonable folly, and inconsistency of her sex — one who can dream of kisses and caresses, and know the full value of them, and of the love I mean to give her in return for hers.'

'Oh, my poor innocent little Lavinia!' murmured the Princess with clasped hands, while her friends stood awestruck, and Casale felt for one instant that he had truly been a little brutal in so deeply scandalising his worthy and virtuous future mother-in-law on this first evening of admittance into her family circle.



CHAPTER IV

As Don Uberto Casale issued from the spacious arches that formed the entrance of the Palazzo Astalli, where two carriages could easily stand abreast, the cold clear February moon was shining brightly on the huge pile of the Farnese Palace opposite. Its graceful bridge hung like a huge arm athwart the street, draped in a dark green sleeve of luxurious trailing plants and sweet-smelling old-fashioned flowers. It rested, as it were, on the roof of the little church which stood beside the Palazzo degli Astalli, and cast a black shadow on the white paving of the street.

Uberto stood in the full light of the moon, but to pursue his way he was obliged to step into the gloom cast by the lofty bridge above his head, and he remembered with a shudder and a foreboding of coming evil that the church was called 'Dell' Orazione e Morte' — the Church of Prayer and Death.

And so the dark memento mori ever casts its shadow across the broad light of each life's greatest joy.

He walked down the Via Giulia towards the Ponte Sisto, and then, instead of making his way home, he ascended the half-dozen steps that lead to the new pavement built out recently on each side of the old bridge. When nearly half-way over he turned to survey the home of the woman he loved. He strained his eyes to catch the glimmer of a light from behind the closed shutters, and anxiously tried to make the instincts of his passion tell him in which wing, behind which window, she then slumbered. The old black pile of masonry, with its long

wings projecting towards the terrace, was entirely in the shade, while the green terrace itself was illuminated by the clear cold moonlight. The tall black trees cast weird shadows, which changed the usual aspect of the spot. It looked mysterious and abandoned — the garden of some long-since deceased Sultana, whose ghost, exiled from the smiling shores of the blue Bosphorus, in expiation for the evil deeds done there, had been doomed to haunt the dreary gloomy banks of the muddy Tiber. Uberto gazed at it for some moments, and then turned his eyes to the water which silently and treacherously stole about the foot of the terrace.

He thought how pleasant it would be to climb that wall from the little boat whence he had so often watched Lavinia as she moved about her garden in the early morning with old Angelo. He longed to take her for a row on that beautiful clear night, to tell again his sweet love-story, while she leaned back, her slender form hidden in soft white wraps, and the boat floating gently down the stream into that bluish-white mist that hung over the water! He would only take her as far down as Nero's golden palace, and bring her safely home before the moon had sunk behind the Janiculum.

'And what fun it would be,' he exclaimed almost aloud, 'to inform the Signora Principessa at luncheon to-morrow of the night's proceedings, and watch the faces of the patriarch and his worthy spouse as they listened to the communication!' His spirits rose at the thought of such a delightful impossibility, and he laughed aloud, a clear, joyous, youthful laugh, forgetting the ill-omened cloud that had spread over his heart under the treacherous shadow of the Farnese Bridge by the Church of Prayer and Death.

He felt too happy to go home to bed, and roamed about the deserted streets and the Lungaretta into the Città Leonina, till he found himself in the Piazza di San Pietro.

A group of students with mandolins and guitars stood near the obelisk, singing Neapolitan songs of Piedigrotta. He leaned against one of the great travertine columns of the colonnade and listened to them. He too loved those characteristic melodies that burst like a great sob, on each September Festa, from the bosom of that miserable, pleasure-loving, careless population.

It was nearly daylight when he reached his father's house, and let himself in with his little latch-key through the diminutive postern contrived in the great door of the palace.

Lavinia, when she had left him, wended her way swiftly and noiselessly, as one walking in sleep, to the apartment she occupied with her sister and the governess. She had forgotten Bianca's existence, and was making straight for her own room through her sister's, when the voice of the latter arrested her, low and hushed, for fear of waking Mademoiselle Gilberte.

Bianca sat bolt upright in her little white bed, her eyes immeasurably wide open in her effort to see as much as was possible, notwithstanding the desire she felt to close them at the unexpected glare of Lavinia's candle.

'Who is he, Lavinia?' she whispered rapidly. 'What is he like? Is he a Roman? Who made the marriage?'

Instead of answering, Lavinia placed her candle on the table, and moving noiselessly towards the bed, folded her little sister in her arms, and pressed her own burning cheeks to hers.

'My darling,' she said tenderly, 'he is more beautiful than any of our saints or angels. He told me that he loved me, that ours is not to be a mariage de convenance, and his name is Uberto Casale di Vallinfreda!'

Bianca started so violently that she almost jumped out of Lavinia's arms to the floor.

'Uberto Casale!' she uttered in a voice of measureless dismay, 'Uberto Casale! Mother Ignatia's nephew, for

whom I and all the nuns had to pray so often, and for whom she wept and fasted incessantly? Why, Lavinia,' she went on in a frenzy of excitement, 'he is a LIBERAL!'

'He is my love, my first, my only love,' answered Lavinia smiling, a new tender light in her changing eyes; 'it matters little what his politics may be. He is the best, the truest, the noblest of men.'

She already believed implicitly in the man she loved. It is woman's way of loving; and no woman loves truly who feels not that whole trust, that ready giving up of self, past, now, and to come; and it is easier to move mountains than to shake that virgin faith. Life draws the veil from trusting eyes, and though she cannot but love still the god so fair but yesterday, that love can never again be itself, so whole, so trusting, and so strong.

'If I could but repeat to you, Bianca mia, the new and strange words he said to me!' continued Lavinia. 'You and I never dreamed of such lovely things! I have often tried to picture to myself the joys of Heaven. But what are they compared to those he promised me in his beautiful song!'

'Ah! he sang to you, did he?' inquired Bianca with increased interest. 'What were the words of his song?'

'I could not tell you,' answered Lavinia dreamily. 'They sounded so confusingly new and beautiful that he must have composed them there and then for me. Who but he, since the world began, could ever have thought such lovely things?' Then after a pause — 'It was something about the joys of love on earth being so sublimely fair as to make the angels in Heaven envy them ——'

'Oh, how shocking!' interrupted Bianca, clasping her hands. 'But I am not surprised. I told you he was a Liberal!' She shook her fair curly head despondently.

'And he sang,' continued Lavinia, regardless of the depreciation of her lover's moral worth contained in Bianca's opprobrious epithet, 'that my heart would soon

awaken to the magic touch of love, and that he would teach me that life is full of splendour, of joy, of the sweet odorous breath of delight — a perfect Heaven on earth! To-morrow, and the next day, and for ever afterwards, I am to listen to that sweet music. Bianca, Bianca! We never guessed at happiness like this! Is it that never woman was loved before as I am? Or rather is it not that such things were carefully hidden from us?'

'Neither, sister,' answered Bianca. 'If such love existed we should surely have seen some signs of it in our parents. And if it is such an universal law of nature — and we know that all such are made by God — and so sublime as to be envied by the angels, who can only desire righteous things, why should they have hidden it from us?' They both sat silent for some moments, trying to solve the mystery.

Lavinia suddenly drew her sister nearer to her, that she might hide her face on her shoulder.

'He told me that I was beautiful,' she whispered, 'and to hear it from the lips of the man who is going to marry me because he loves me was so very very sweet! —— Sorellina! My dear little Sorellina,' she continued imploringly, 'give up the idea of going into that cold loveless Convent! Believe me, there is no life but love. I will tell Uberto to find just such another as himself for you, and you too shall taste of this new life.'

Lavinia kissed her little sister fondly, while Bianca sat speechless, listening to her outpourings. Her grey eyes were fixed on the white wall before her, like those of one hypnotised, while visions new and startling succeeded each other in the workings of her brain.

The atmosphere of the paternal home in which the twin sisters had lived and had their being was so icily cold and devoid of all human love and sympathy, and the lifting of the cloud which hid the sun and darkened the brightness of its rays had been so sudden and unexpected,

that not only had Lavinia's nature been profoundly convulsed, but Bianca herself began to feel the glow of Lavinia's passion reflected in her own soul.

She no longer doubted the existence of that love she had despised only a moment before. Something within herself told her that it really existed; that the happiness it had brought to Lavinia's heart was as true as it was deep, and that this great unknown Something which Uberto Casale had tried to explain to her sister in his song was perhaps more grand and beautiful than anything she had ever dreamed of as appertaining to this life.

She searched in the past for some vestige of it in the lives of her parents — in the marriages of her sisters — but she found nothing. And no wonder, for in that patriarchal family all things were brought about systematically, mechanically, compactly. The marriages of the elder daughters had been arranged between the parents, as Lavinia's had been, without its ever having been thought necessary to consult the parties most concerned. At a signal from the mother's all-powerful hand, like the beating of time to music — one, two, three — the daughter's heart had been told to beat for her betrothed, and she had submissively received the time-honoured injunction to cherish and obey the husband who had been found for her; and the said husband married her, scarcely knowing her, and carried her off to a remote home in a distant part of Italy.

The theory of arranging marriages formed a well-pondered philosophical system. Love-matches, said parents belonging to Prince Astalli's time and party, are just as apt to turn out unhappily as those in which love has no part. Taken all together, the aggregate of happiness is about the same in the one as in the other. Therefore in contracting a marriage it was thought wise to hold to the old system and arrange it like any other business transaction before a lawyer and witnesses, after

making sure that the future husband possessed all the requisites which insure the well-being and material comforts of life. If after the benediction of the priest a little mild sentiment should be added, so much the better.

The marriage of the Prince and Princess Astalli had been settled in this manner, and they by no means considered themselves an unhappy couple.

When an alliance between two Roman families was considered advisable — it mattered little whether they were nearly related or not — mutual friends, generally ecclesiastics, undertook the transaction as a business affair. If the head of one of these houses happened to be a bachelor or a childless widower, it was for him to speak in the name of the younger brother who was the father of the young man or of the maiden.

The parents or relatives then met and discussed the minute details of the young couple's future establishment. They came to an understanding as to how many servants there were to be in the servants' hall — how many maids in the guardaroba, and the number of horses to be kept for their particular use in the family stables. The agreement defined with equal detail how many evenings a week the bride should have her box at the opera — and who was to pay the wages and bear the expense of the handsome presents it was customary to give to the 'balie' or nurses of the children to be born.

Two per cent of the bride's dower was, of course, allowed her as spillatico — pin money. When both parties had come to an understanding after threatening half a dozen times to throw over the whole business, a legal document was drawn up, witnessed and signed, and then only were the young people informed that they were engaged to be married.

Should you by chance ask the Princess Agnese if her marriage had offered her any disagreeable surprises with regard to her husband's habits or character, she would

answer you that having both been educated under the holy iron rule, which she believed in and adored, they had found each other exactly what they had expected.

And if you further wished to know if love had come afterwards, she would shrug her shoulders and tell you that love was a very charming thing to look at through opera-glasses at the Teatro Apollo when sung by Grisi, Malibran, or other great *dive* of her day, but very dangerous to have anything to do with in real life, and that they had both avoided such useless encumbrances. After these many years they got on about as well as most old married people who had begun life in a whirlwind of passion, if not a great deal better.

Lavinia, still seated on her sister's little bed, continued to pour forth her never-ceasing rhapsodies, and Bianca listened to them with growing interest. Presently a vague uneasy feeling that she was learning more than was good for her, seized the little nun. Her sister's words sounded like the charm of a forbidden incantation, undermining her past life, and tempting her back to the joys of this world, which she had determined to renounce for ever.

Her conscience warned her of coming danger; she felt that she ought to silence Lavinia.

'Do not tell me more of your love, for your words fascinate me,' she thought she should have said. 'What is good and beautiful for you, who are going to marry the man who loves you, cannot but be poisonous to me, who have renounced such joys, and chosen the steep and thorny way to Heaven.'

And yet a voice within kept tempting her. Had she knowingly renounced those joys? Had she not been told that they were ephemeral, bringing sorrows and tears with them? And had she not renounced the former in cowardly dread of the latter? Had not her choice been dictated by fear rather than by courage? And now, since

she had learned that there were unknown horizons of boundless happiness where she thought to find the dark clouds of trouble, could she conscientiously follow her sister's steps and willingly change her prerogative of being one of the chosen, simply to become one of the many called? And yet she was still free! She had taken no vows. She too was young and had as good a right to taste of the sweetness of youth — to love and be loved — as had Lavinia.

The two girls parted at last. Lavinia slipped into her small bed, happy to be alone, so as to live over in her memory those moments when Uberto was by her side and spoke of his love — to recall his features — to try and hear again the sound of his voice in the stillness of the night.

Bianca, nervous and unhappy, tossed restlessly, fighting against those same visions which were the source of such delight to her sister, trying to forget the thrill of longing that had troubled her heart at Lavinia's strange revelations, and praying earnestly to the Heavenly Bridegroom she had chosen, and for whom she longed to toil and suffer, that she might not be led into temptation.

When Mademoiselle Gilberte came to open her shutters in the morning — uneasy at not hearing her move at the usual hour — she found her sleeping profoundly, her pale cheek resting on her pillow wet with tears, and her little silver crucifix clasped tightly to her breast.

CHAPTER V

BIANCA was right to marvel that Lavinia had been formally promised in marriage to a Liberal, and all Rome marvelled with her. When the engagement was officially announced, the Whites shrugged their shoulders in contemptuous dismay, and concluded that their favourite patriot, the conspicuous Roman hero of Italian independence, was either in his dotage or fast nearing it, to have consented to the marriage of his son with a daughter of one of the most unyielding, narrow-minded opponents of their modern institutions.

To the Blacks, who, by force of habit and ancient tradition, blended the spiritual with the temporal, this marriage was a cause of scandal. They asked each other in dismay how it came about that such religious people as the 'Gens Astallia' — so universally respected for the staunchness of their principles and blind devotion to the Holy See — could give a daughter of theirs, educated as only the Catholic Apostolic Romans knew how to educate young girls, to a man of Liberal opinions, the son of one of the well-known enemies of the Temporal Power.

Many began to particularise their different appreciations, to make gloomy prophecies as to Lavinia's future happiness in this world and the next, and to ask each other strange questions, which none could answer. For instance, would Don Uberto Casale take Donna Lavinia degli Astalli to Court and present her to the Queen? And if so, what would the Pope have to say to that? Or rather, would not Donna Lavinia's beautiful eyes beguile Don Uberto into going to the Vatican? The most chari-

table and kind-hearted Blacks held to the latter opinion, whereas the bitter-tongued, unreconcilable, discontented majority willingly inclined towards the former supposition. Would Leo XIII. make the customary wedding gift to the daughter of one of his faithful princes, who was given in marriage to a Philistine? If Donna Lavinia were presented to the Queen of Italy, what would they have in common to talk about? It was said that Queen Margaret was gracious and full of tact — a most necessary virtue in a court like hers, where so many unprecedented situations were constantly arising — the natural consequence of the revolution to which the house of Savoy owed its crown. But this strangely assorted marriage was unique in the modern annals of history, and the social incongruities would prove embarrassing and equally disagreeable to all parties. Lavinia, moreover, was but a mere child, and all agreed that it was most cruel of her parents thus to put her savoir-faire to the test. The idle and the disappointed, of which the world is full, added many sarcastic remarks, while the mothers of marriageable maidens bit their lips, raged internally, and abused openly the Princess Astalli for her perspicacity and cleverness in securing such a match for her child, while they had overlooked Don Uberto Casale because of his reputation of being rather a fast man, not at all inclined to matrimony, and whose name was associated with that of more than one brilliant woman of the world.

The Prince and Princess Astalli knew perfectly well what was being said. They fully acknowledged the amount of blame that would be cast on them by their own party for acquiescing in such a marriage. In the balance of the 'pros and cons' were weighed the advantages and the satirical criticisms and disapprovals; and yet the Princess had not hesitated to make her final decision. Notwithstanding her very genuine and fervent piety, she had been in her youth one of the brilliant

leading planets of Roman society, when the political controversy had not yet divided that society into two separate camps; and she well knew what an advantage it would be for her daughter to marry a member of one of the noblest of the old Roman families, who stood equal to his brother with regard to fortune, no matter of what political colour he might be.

She did not like to admit the fact to herself, but she felt that time was beginning to tell on the old animosities; that the rising generation, which by force of the new laws was being educated at the public schools, was mixing and fusing with the Liberals. She could not help seeing that those of the higher caste were becoming friends, simply because they knew that they were all, more or less, nearly related to each other, that their immediate interests were the same, and that consequently they thought much more of the present than of the past Italian politics.

Others, their studies completed, soon wearied of their parents' sullen seclusion from the moving progressing life around them, and finding that their evenings weighed too heavily on their hands in the uninteresting family circle, were beginning to seek diversion in the neutral drawing-rooms of strangers and members of the diplomatic corps. They were thus constantly being thrown with men of their age, but of a different political colour, and in time they ceased to carry their flags into society, and in their youthful pursuit of pleasure they were led into forgetting their differences altogether, freely frequenting the houses of members of all parties. At the time of Casale's engagement this movement towards social conciliation had only become sufficiently perceptible to be noticed by a small number of Romans.

A few years later it began to dawn on the minds of some individuals belonging to the Clerical party that it was folly to believe that the children should feel as did

their parents about such things, or take up the quarrel with their old fiery party-spirit.

They realised that young men of the present day cannot remember the time when there was a Temporal Power of the Popes; that they had not seen that form of government to which their parents adhered so staunchly, and could not swear allegiance to it, as they did. That the younger generation had never fought or suffered for it, and could only know their country in its present state, to love it with all its faults and follies, because it was their country; all the more, perhaps, because ambitious men at the head of the government created unjust laws, and mismanaged its interests.

Neither of Lavinia's parents, however, could see the stringent logic of the arguments raised against them, which were those of the broader-minded Clerical partisans; they cordially hated everything that was Italian, and daily instilled into the mind of their son their own uncompromising intolerance.

Though they changed not, they remarked with growing sadness that things were changing around them, and that even while it served their worldly ambitious project at that moment, it was a sad sign of relaxed moral principles that Lavinia, notwithstanding her marriage to a Liberal, the son of a patriot and a conspirator, should be received with open arms by the great majority of Blacks.

If the Princess and her husband had doubts about Don Uberto Casale's principles, they endeavoured to drive them away by the consideration that the very fact of his wishing to marry such an angelically pious girl as their child was a proof that he meant to mend his ways and settle down as a paterfamilias.

The marriage contract was verbally agreed upon by the two fathers in several meetings. Prince Astalli came armed with a pocket-book in which were noted all sorts of absurd little difficulties and exactions, where the cen-

times figured oftener than the francs, and these he produced with a great amount of policy, the one after the other, as if he were fencing against a cunning adversary. The Marquis solved each and all with a broad laugh by adding a few thousand lire here and there, and ended by insisting that Lavinia's dowry, which was as small as the Prince could decently make it during his lifetime, should be entirely at her disposal. This unusual arrangement shocked Prince Astalli's old ideas; he believed that the family should always take all it could get out of a marriage contract for its future honour and glory.

This he thought it his duty to point out to Uberto's father for conscience sake, notwithstanding that it was against his own child's interests.

'Uberto will have plenty, never fear!' the old Marquis would answer. 'A woman loves to be mistress of her fortune, no matter how small it may be. It makes her feel independent!'

This justification of his anti-Roman manner of transacting business startled and disturbed the Prince, and caused him more uneasiness with regard to Lavinia's future moral welfare than the friendly remonstrances and observations made by all the family connections.

It was arranged that the new couple should become members of the Marchese Casale's family, as was customary — that is to say, they were to have their own private apartment on the second floor of the palace, their own servants, horses, and carriages, but should take their meals at his table, as did Don Ferdinando and his family, who occupied one of the grand apartments on the first floor. Prince Astalli sighed several times as all these particulars were being drawn up by the solicitors. In his heart he was deploring the fact that there was no mother-in-law to take Lavinia in hand, to guide and command her. He was learning each day to distrust more and more the broad easy opinions of these new-

fashioned Romans, and his only comfort lay in the belief that by serious private recommendations to Donna Matilde he could induce her to assume some authority over Lavinia, and lead her inexperienced steps.

It was the first time in two hundred years that the names of Casale di Vallinfreda and Astalli were to appear on a peaceful document; and the generous Marchese chuckled with delight as he drew Prince Astalli's attention to the fact, and reminded him that if the times had not changed, as he and those of his party very inconsistently desired, there would have been fighting in the streets and in the courts of their palaces, had any one so much as dared hint at the possibility of a marriage alliance between the hostile families.

An ancient quarrel about the fief of Vallinfreda existed between them, which in time had become rusty, but had for hundreds of years filled shelves upon shelves of the two family archives with legal parchments and Papal and Royal chirographies. Lest the feud might die out, it was as regularly bequeathed to the head of the house in actual succession as the baronial castles, titles, broad lands, artistic treasures and family jewels.

Similar cases were not at all rare in a country where everything seemed to be eternal, and situated as it was on the boundaries of the Neapolitan kingdom, which was incessantly convulsed by internal warfare, when not ravaged by the immediate dominion of the Spanish or Austrian sovereigns and their representatives, viceroys, or barons. Sometimes with a change of the supreme power the bone of contention lost its intrinsic value. At others the pecuniary conditions of the contending parties were not such as to allow them to sustain the heavy expenses of long-pending, continually renewed lawsuits. Most of the property bequeathed to the present Marchese Casale by his ancestors was situated within the former confines of the Pontifical states, but many

worm-eaten, time-worn documents, jealously preserved in the family archives, stood to prove that in the olden times, hundreds of years ago, the Casale had possessed manifold impregnable fortresses and castles, with high-sounding titles, surrounded by miles of green fields, olive groves and vineyards in the kingdom of Naples.

From these same old papers it may be gathered that the barons of those times gradually withdrew from their many possessions, but whether yielding to force when defeated by the overbearing arrogance of their neighbours, or freely of their own will — which seems improbable, considering the violence of the warlike passions of the times — history does not tell us.

What seems sure is, that under the Spanish dominion in the year 1648, when Philip IV. was King of Spain and the Two Sicilies, and Don Rodrigo Ponce de Leon, Duke of Arcos, was Viceroy of Naples, the only fortress still belonging to the Casale was that of Vallinfreda.

It was situated in the heart of the Apennines, and difficult to reach save by a few sheep-trodden mountain paths, and the Marchese Rufo Casale, then head of the house, who dared not guard it himself, gave it in 'emphyteusis' for twenty-five years, with its rents and title, to a distant cousin, by name Oddone Casale, of the Neapolitan branch of the family.

He was an ambitious daring youth, was this Don Oddone, who went to work at once to increase his income by assaulting his neighbours and plundering their wheat-fields, and flourished with magnificence at the Viceroy's court in Naples.

But having joined a conspiracy against the Spanish in 1665, when Charles II. succeeded Philip IV. on the Spanish throne — for to conspire seems to have been a natural proclivity of the race, faithfully transmitted through succeeding generations to the present head of the house — he was arrested for high treason and beheaded

in the Fort of St. Elmo. His personal property and the powerful barony of Vallinfreda were confiscated to the Crown.

The Marchese Rufo Casale attempted to prove before the King's Council and the Courts of Justice, such as they were in those dark times, that the fief belonged to him and to his heirs, as being entailed property which by royal decree formed part of the 'Fideicommissum' of the Roman branch of the family, and was therefore inalienable.

But those were times when deeds accomplished, whether justly or iniquitously, were everything, and written documents had little weight, and Rufo Casale's lawyers' appeals awakened no echoes in the deserted Neapolitan Courts of Justice. Years passed and brought no change. The Marchese Rufo died, still hoping that the sword would make way for the gown, and his son succeeded him.

In 1700 the Bourbon King Philip V. succeeded Charles II., and one of the first acts of his reign was to grant the Castle and property of Vallinfreda to Prince Astalli, a powerful Roman whom he wished to draw to his cause, and who already owned vast estates in the neighbourhood of Vallinfreda.

The deed of gift was an unjust one, inasmuch as the former acts of Kings and Popes when in full possession of the kingdom or portions of it — in which the Casale of that epoch was acknowledged to be the legitimate Signore of Vallinfreda — had not been abrogated, and the Marchese protested again, though feebly, for the family was poor at that time.

Prince Astalli restored the weather-beaten castle walls, built new wings to it, filled it with tapestries, pictures and all sorts of priceless objects of art, turned the wheat-fields into parks and enchanted gardens with statues and fountains, and made of the whole a small Versailles for the family residence during the summer months.

When the palace was completed in 1710, a Marchese Uberto Casale who had married a rich wife was tempted by the magnificence of the castle to renew the struggle, and, strange to say, won his suit. The Astalli had to depart in haste, leaving their treasures in the hands of their enemies, who took triumphant possession of all, and filled the surrounding hills with armed men to defend their rights.

But their triumph was of but short duration. Another Astalli having again presented his suit before the Tribunals under a new aspect, received a favourable sentence, and with the assistance of the royal troops dislodged his adversary from his newly-acquired possession. The Casale were justly reputed wily and clever people, and before surrendering the stronghold managed to smuggle out of it most of the beautiful objects of art which had been so lovingly and carefully collected by the Astalli, but which to-day form the pride and glory of the Casale Palace.

Thus it came to pass that there were in Rome two Counts of Vallinfreda, who believed their claims to the title equally good, though unjust laws and arbitrary sovereigns had alternately deprived each of the claimants of their rights of possession.

Things remained in this state for nearly two centuries, the Illustrissima Casa Astalli invariably passing four months of the year at Vallinfreda, while the Eccellentissima Casa Casale resolutely bore the name, which, curiously enough, none of the Astalli ancestors had ever liked, or dared to assume, and at the Papal Court enjoyed all the privileges attached to it.

Every thirty years regularly, or at the succeeding of a new heir, two huge sheets of legal papers were exchanged between the attorneys of the two houses, and for some little time afterwards a slight coldness arose between the male members of the rival families; but in time this

gradually wore away, only to be renewed when the head of one or the other party happened to depart this life, or when the legal thirty years expired. The papers referring to all these strange old lawsuits had now rested for many scores of years unheeded and covered with dust, and though the angry feelings had faded into dimness like the ink on the manuscripts, they had never been so wholly obliterated as to render possible a marriage between any members of the two families.

CHAPTER VI

At an age when first impressions are very deep and lasting, Bianca had been incessantly told that of all her sisters she was the only one blessed with an especial calling. In her childish hands were placed the lives of holy women, particularly of St. Agnes, St. Teresa, and St. Scholastica, and she was bidden to imitate their virtues if she wished to reap their reward, and draw down heavenly blessings upon her family.

This was but natural and consequent amidst people imbued with the antiquated belief that it was necessary that one of their kindred should do penance, weep, and pray at the foot of the altar, in order to disarm the Divine wrath which would otherwise punish the whole family for past and present sins.

Forty years ago there were convents in Rome filled with ladies of noble birth, and in some there were entire apartments belonging to certain families, and the ceilings and walls of these spacious rooms, as well as the simple solid furniture, were decorated with their crests and coats of arms. Many young Roman girls embraced the conventual life because they were really blessed with a religious vocation, and these were sure to find peace and happiness in the strict rules and regularity of such an existence; but many were induced by moral pressure to do so, principally because they were so poor that their parents could not find husbands for them, and such a thing as an unwedded life in the world was looked upon as a disgrace. Elderly maidens were considered, more-

over, to be a dead weight upon the family, and were treated accordingly.

Now and then it happened that the daughter of a patrician remained under her father's roof until her maidenhood had ripened into middle age, and finding herself a burthen to her people she would withdraw to one of those religious houses where the inmates are bound by no solemn vows, but live in saintly retirement while enjoying a certain amount of liberty and the universal respect and esteem of the outer world.

In those days when afternoon calls were unknown, and there existed no public drives, one of the favourite occupations of the Roman ladies was to visit the convents, where so many aunts, nieces, daughters, and remote relations, as well as school friends and companions, were cloistered for life. There were no five o'clock teas then, the Roman society met only of an evening at each other's houses or at the theatre, and visiting cards, the bane of a fashionable woman's existence, had not yet been introduced into the customs of the country.

The large bare convent parlours with their high-backed chairs placed round the whitewashed walls, a sacred picture here and there, and the clean polished oak table in the centre of the room, would seem but cold and inhospitable reception-rooms to us, used as we are to soft easy-chairs and Persian rugs. And yet all that was remarkable in the world for wealth, wit and worldly dignity belonging to the Papal Court and Roman society was to be found collected there of an afternoon. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monsignori, abbés of noble birth, or those who dressed as abbés — it being then the court dress — savants, poets or beaux esprits, great ladies and fine gentlemen, old and young, all met there, and exchanged their stately courtesies before discussing the news of the day.

The nuns received their visitors from behind a double

iron grating, forming two large square apertures like windows in the thick wall which separated the room where they were from the parlour where their guests were assembled. There was a space of some two feet between the outer and the inner iron bars, so that the nuns could easily see and speak to their visitors, but could not reach them with their hands. On the sill of these internal windows lay a little wooden shovel, used for passing small objects backwards and forwards between the gratings, but when these were too large to be thus disposed of, they were placed in a cupboard in the corner of the room, called the 'ruota,' which turned on a pivot, and were received in the cloistered room by a lay sister whose duty it was to attend to the means of communication with the outer world, delivering to each nun the objects destined for her. The iron bars and heavy gratings which so shock the modern ideas of free will and individual liberty, and are so often taken as the tangible proof that force was brutally used against harmless women, had been invented and adapted as a safeguard and protection for them in dark times when violence, theft and murder were the natural consequences of war.

There exists a Bull of Boniface VIII. to all bishops and secular authorities, which enjoins upon them "to make sure that the convents of nuns in their different dioceses and states be well protected by high walls, solid doors and iron bars, that in the inroads made on the different cities and towns by the invading armies, these same nuns might be safe from the sacrilegious fury and rapacity of the soldiers."

Many of the Roman convents were built before the Council of Trent, but after the promulgation in 1564 of the Decree concerning the enclosure and safety of nuns, they were regularly fortified, and their windows and doors strengthened with iron bars against the possibility of an attack.

Things had greatly changed in Bianca's time even in the slow-paced Eternal City, since similar regulations were considered necessary; but the convents, with their rules, had remained immutable. Time had altered nothing within those sacred walls, except the faces — not the names — of the nuns, who said the same Latin prayers at the identical hour, did the same kind of needlework, consisting of embroidery on linen and vestments for the clergy; and made small scapularies and fancifully-shaped little bags containing bits of Agnus Dei to be worn round the neck by the faithful.

Periodically the rules of the convent, or of the Order to which it belonged — being Papal Bulls and decrees of hundreds of years' standing — were read aloud in the community. And living as those nuns did, in the same atmosphere, cut off from all outward influences, it is more than probable that their thoughts were precisely those of the sisters gone to rest before them. If one should take up the convent register and read the names of the nuns of two hundred years earlier it would be difficult to realise that life itself had not become immortal within those walls. There was a Bianca degli Astalli mentioned in the books of the Carmelites in 1650, another one in 1740, and still another in 1795, who, "through her great humility and her sublime spirit of mortification, had died in great odour of sanctity."

Passive obedience, complete self-abnegation, excessive practice of mortification, physical suffering and constant prayer within the iron-barred cloister were the principal rules enjoined by the rigorous, mediæval, canonical laws.

They asked not if what was then in keeping with the times might not be out of date in a more enlightened and civilised century. Their families recked little of the innovations; tradition was everything, and those who entered the convents found those rules existing, obeyed them, and would have gone on doing so for many another

hundred years perhaps, had not the great impulse of modernisation swept away the convents themselves.

Amongst its promoters there were many who had a secret desire to destroy the spirit as well as the objective expression of religious enthusiasm, but these were disappointed; for what they destroyed was only its antiquated outward form, and it soon lived again more vigorous than ever, in new religious institutions appropriate to the present needs of society, based on the broader principles of Christian charity, and having for their aim the instruction and the moral regeneration of the lower classes.

But let us return to the afternoon receptions of long ago in the different nunneries most patronised by the ladies of high birth, before the hammer and the axe overtake us and beat down the old walls and gardens to make room for new streets, public walks where the public is seldom admitted, or barracks for the Italian soldiers.

The noble hostesses, clothed in heavy brown woollen frocks, which they wore night and day, with their spotless wimples and black scapularies, and their delicate bare feet in rough leathern sandals, received their guests from behind their gratings with placid urbanity and distant smiles. Many important affairs were transacted in those bare convent parlours, which could rival any fashionable drawing-room of to-day in the quality and number of their guests. Marriages were arranged, business affairs settled, and family quarrels appeased there; nor is it at all impossible that sweet glances were cast by the young over their parents' shoulders, and now and then a tender 'billet-doux' exchanged under the noses of the unsuspecting nuns.

The ladies rose to make way for a Cardinal, kissing his ring as he passed and neared the grating. Once there, he would ask for Sister Maria Crucifissa, to thank

her for the delicious biscuits she had made according to the old secret recipe known to her alone, and jealously guarded, which she had sent his Eminence on his last reception. Others called to see Sister Maddalena Penitente, to compliment her on the beautiful sacred hymns she had composed in honour of Saint Philomena, which they pronounced to be most touchingly edifying.

Then there came a time when the Goddess of Liberty shook her long idle wings and heaved a great sigh as she awoke from the slumber of ages, stirring and vivifying the inhabitants of the beautiful peninsula as they basked in the sunshine of blissful ignorance and apathetic nescience.

A new era began, and notwithstanding the moral blockade instituted by the ecclesiastical authorities to protect the capital of the world from the burning contagious breath of the goddess, faint whiffs of it penetrated within the fortified walls, and new ideas, vague hypotheses regarding the amelioration of the civil laws, imperceptibly began to spread amidst the Romans, and unwittingly to change the face of things. Wars and rumours of wars in the Pontifical states, rebellion of divers cities, and their annexation to the United Italian kingdom — revolts, treacherous reprisals, infringement of legal rights under pretext of liberty of action — barefaced treason committed and applauded as patriotism — such were the evil effects of this great awakening. Political passions and preoccupations filled the hearts of all, and in the unusual excitement the poor nuns were neglected when not forgotten. Little by little, fewer guests were seen in the convents. New interests began to fill the existence of the Romans. The numbers of maidens wishing to spend their lives in convents of the contemplative orders, no longer in harmony with the ideas of the times, grew less, and even before the promulgation of the barbarous laws which despoiled these harmless women of their homes

and their money, it began to be evident that these antiquated institutions were doomed to disappear.

One of the few which were temporarily allowed to subsist, though eventually condemned like the others, was the Carmelite Convent on Monte Cavallo, commonly called 'of the Barberine,' because it was built by Urban VIII. on the Barberini property, and was immediately dependent on that family.

The Princess Astalli was a constant visitor at this house, where she counted relations by the dozen, and Bianca's earliest remembrances were associated with it. Before she could speak or stand alone the nuns prognosticated that she would one day join the sisterhood, and as a little girl she was treated by the gentle sisters with especial consideration. When refreshments were served, consisting of lemonade made with the juice of the luscious yellow lemons of the convent garden, and different kinds of cakes and sweetmeats, of almonds, chocolate, cloves and honey — fashioned by the dainty hands of the sisters, she was helped to a double portion.

There were holidays — at Christmas or during Carnival week, for instance — when many little bright-eyed greedy folk sat round the great old centre table enjoying the treat, while their mammas talked amongst themselves within hearing of the sisters behind the iron bars.

On such occasions Bianca was placed at the head of the table; and the lively, chatting flock looked up to her with awe as a future hostess, to be robed in heavy wool, and shut off from them at some distant epoch by that scowling dark grating. When about ten years old she heard by chance one day the solemn group of matrons discuss the new religious orders which were beginning to spread in Rome. She crept away from the noisy lot of her little friends, and stealthily drew nearer to them.

'I am told,' said one of the nuns, 'that these sisters of St. Vincent of Paul, quite a modern saint' — a fact which

was not entirely to his honour in the mind of the good sister — 'have been nursing in the hospitals for many years in France; but that our Holy Father would not allow them to perform such offices in Rome until quite lately, for fear of scandalising the Romans.'

'And no wonder!' exclaimed an elderly sister, lifting her hands in deprecation. 'They are said to nurse men of all ages, as well as women; they not only travel about the world with delicate young men, but even start upon distant journeys quite alone, and wander about night and day unprotected in lonely barbarous countries. I am even told that they follow the armies on the fields of battle to assist the wounded. When they were first tolerated in the hospital of Santo Spirito, I remember hearing some of our venerable sisters say that it was a concession to modern notions, and I know that a great many worthy pious Romans who live in the world cannot yet become reconciled to the idea.'

The pale child with the great pensive eyes listened to all that was said with deep interest. She longed to hear more about those wonderful nuns, so different from the Barberine, but she dared not ask a question.

Once at home, she went in search of Mademoiselle Gilberte and greeted her with a startling question.

'What are the Sisters of Charity, Mademoiselle?'

'They are nuns who live for others instead of for themselves, my dear, and the founder of their Order was St. Vincent of Paul, a French priest of the time of Marie Antoinette,' answered the governess with a little tinge of pride. Mademoiselle was French, and very proud of all that was good, as coming from her beloved country.

'How can they be as holy as our nuns then, if they live in the world, and have to see its wickedness and converse with all sorts of perverted people?' asked the child, wonderingly and doubtfully.

Whereupon Mademoiselle Gilberte poured forth into

her willing ears all she knew about the saintly founder of the Order and the lives and pursuits of his spiritual children She was a devoted admirer of the meek and humble saint, and with a native zeal and enthusiasm which for years had been centred on religious matters, notwithstanding her veneration for the ancient Orders she loudly sang the praises of the new, and told Bianca of the immense good these sisters were doing in the world by teaching the young and nursing the sick.

She little guessed how fertile was the soil in which she had unwittingly sown good seed. Bianca, for many months after this, never referred to the subject again; but while preparing for her first communion she began to ask strange questions, and finally requested to be allowed to read what books there were which treated of modern religious institutions. These were freely granted her, none suspecting the drift of her mind, and with a tact more womanly than childish she persuaded Mademoiselle Gilberte to take her to visit all the schools, orphan asylums, and hospitals entrusted to the care of the Sisters of Mercy. She soon became familiar with their ways of thinking, formed friendships with many of them which in after years became the joy of her life, and ended by training her unsuspecting governess into allowing her to pass most of her free hours in their midst.

Of course the Princess knew nothing of this. Mademoiselle was not in the habit of rendering an account of the day's proceedings, and she thought that this way of occupying Bianca's time, and interesting her with such worthy pursuits, was far better than idling about the streets of Rome.

When Bianca was considered ripe for the sacrifice, her parents consulted together, and determined to apprise her of their willingness to allow her to become a nun.

She had had no childhood. Serious thoughts and sublime aspirations had taken the place of girlish games and

frolicsome idleness; and when her sixteen summers had bloomed with the roses and lilies on her terrace, her parents declared that she too was as a ripe fruit ready to be gathered and offered as a worthy sacrifice. In informing her of this they laid great stress on the fact that what they were doing was for her immediate happiness and future safety. Their ideal of evangelical perfection for one of their caste was that she should swell the number of noble Roman virgins who had left undying examples of saintly virtues in the Carmelite Convent on the Quirinal Hill.

They knew absolutely nothing of the great democratic evolution which was taking place around them, in the very bosom of their Holy Mother the Church, and which they believed they loved and served better than anybody else. When, therefore, Bianca, with a faint heart, in fear and trembling, dared to raise an objection to their preconceived intentions regarding her future, and hinted at her desire to become a hard-working nameless sister in a modern community, where there were no solemn vows, their dismay and indignation were boundless.

It was an unprecedented act of rebellion, one of those shameful humiliating accidents they had sometimes heard of as happening in families as noble as theirs, but at which they were wont to smile compassionately in their hearts, accusing the culprit's father and mother of incapacity in governing their own offspring.

Bianca was barely seventeen when this eventful scene took place. She stood in greater awe of her parents than she did of the archangel's trumpet that was to quicken the dead at the last judgment. She believed implicitly in God's mercy, and trusted to His loving-kindness, whereas at the hands of her father and mother she expected neither.

At the first shadow of a resistance on her part they were dumb with amazement, but her mother's anger soon found words.

'How can we believe that you have any sort of vocation to take the vows, if you begin your religious life by professing an open rebellion against the will of your parents?' she asked scornfully. 'Of your own free will you chose to become a nun, and we acquiesced in your decision. We were happy that you should become a "chosen vessel," and we considered your calling an especial honour conferred by God on the Astalli family. We respect and bow to His decision, and willingly, even joyfully, sacrifice to Him our beloved child, since it is His will to call her to live a life of obedience — obedience, penitence and prayer; but we consider it not only our right to interpret the expression of His will to our children, but our duty to decide in what manner, and in what convent, they are to accomplish it.'

Bianca stood before the Princess with blanched cheeks, her hands tightly clasped together; she felt utterly crushed, and incapable of answering her mother's arguments. Her terror of the fate awaiting her, together with her despair of ever bringing her parents to consider for one moment the workings of her heart and brain, rendered it impossible for her to collect and command her thoughts. She well knew that the Princess was one of those elderly ladies who never listened to what other people say, and by the incessant subserviency of those around them are led into the fatal mistake of believing that they alone are capable of judging what is just and right.

'Dear madre,' she said at last, with faint heart and still more feeble voice, 'God forbid that I should ever, or in any way, disobey you or my revered father. There is but a misunderstanding between us. You were under the impression that I wished to become a Carmelite, whereas I know that I must be a Sister of Charity. Were you to force my will I should be very unhappy, and become the most abject and miserable nun. Surely you do not wish that?'

'Religious vocation is but one,' answered the Princess sententiously. 'Girls of your age are not expected to understand this; whosoever is called to serve God under the rules can do so quite as well in one convent as in another. You should therefore submit to the decision of your elders and betters, overcome your own proud and rebellious will, and consider it the principal and most unavoidable of the many sacrifices you will be called upon to make hereafter. We have all the experience which you lack, and we know that one of your rank and education should never be launched upon the great sea of life amidst its storms of sin and evil passions, nor made to submit to the most humiliating menial offices, a mere servant of the low-born vulgar outcasts of society. Never did an Astalli sink so low, and so long as I have power to command none ever shall.'

'My decision is not of to-day, cara mamma,' pleaded Bianca. 'I have been studying the rules of the different Orders, and the lives of the nuns in each, since I was ten years old, and I have come to the conclusion that the solitude and self-concentration of the ancient monastic life, and the complete detachment from the great suffering human family, would be simply maddening. I have observed what I could for myself, and in constantly frequenting the hospitals, asylums and pauper schools, I have seen with my own eyes the boundless agony, the mute despair that exist in the world, and which I could make it mine to comfort and allay.'

The Princess looked at Bianca for a moment in anxious doubt. Was she speaking metaphorically? Or had she really been dabbling in a little sentimental participation in the daily offices of the Sisters of Charity? If so, what had Mademoiselle Gilberte been about?

'All this is nineteenth-century nonsense,' she said contemptuously to Bianca. 'Sensational, frivolous, romantic sentimentality, based on the morbid modern thirst

for the emotional. God only knows how such sickening emanations of the times ever crept into my family! By your words you stigmatise the lives of all your kindred who lived and died Carmelites, and whose far-famed sanctity is one of the purest glories of our family. They did as they were bid and became saints; do likewise and you will be happy, and God will bless you.'

Similar scenes were constantly renewed. The Princess thundered threats of heavenly malediction, and Bianca bent her head and waited, hoping that the storm would blow over, and her mother's heart would relent before her fate was sealed for ever.

Just when the aforesaid storm was raging most fiercely Bianca's godmother died, leaving her a large fortune. This unexpected event caused such an excitement in the family that for some time nothing else was thought of.

She was a Spanish lady who had married a first cousin of Princess Astalli, thereby becoming Bianca's aunt, according to Roman custom, and for many years had been her mother's most intimate friend. But evil tongues and envious kinsmen, hoping perhaps to profit by the rupture, had parted them.

The wording of the will was very strange, and instead of bringing joy and gladness to the heart of the heir, as is generally the case, especially when coming from distant relatives or unexpected sources, this inheritance was the cause of increased sorrow and anxiety to Bianca.

The principal clause of the childless lady's will ran as follows: —

'I bequeath my entire fortune, consisting in' — here followed a schedule of the different possessions in real estate and otherwise — 'to my beloved niece Bianca degli Astalli, the daughter of Prince Ugo Astalli, about to become a nun in the Carmelite Convent of the Barberine on the Quirinal Hill.'

It was universally known that she professed a passion-

ate devotion for all the poorer religious Orders, and for the Barberine in particular, on whom she had showered her bounties for years, and it was amidst them that she best loved to pass most of her time in prayer and in other religious observances.

No one doubted therefore but that the pious lady would leave the bulk of her fortune to charitable institutions, of which she had been the main supporter during her lifetime, and especially since the new Italian laws had confiscated the Church property and left so many thousands of poor nuns to beg or die of hunger in the streets.

These new laws also forbid legacies to religious corporations or convents, and had she desired to continue to benefit her pet nunnery after her death, she well knew that she could only do so by naming an heir or heiress who would tacitly interpret her will in the spirit and not in the letter.

In leaving her fortune to Bianca she believed she was attaining this end.

The Convent of the Barberine became the real legatee, and neither the law nor the government could find anything to object to in the matter.

Such a fortune, coming unexpectedly to form a handsome dower for their youngest and least attractive daughter, might have deterred people less conscientious than the Prince and Princess Astalli from insisting on her becoming a nun, and might have led them to look about for some princely alliance which would have added to the lustre of their own family. But they were too scrupulously upright to think of such a thing for a moment. They felt more than ever morally bound to accomplish the tacit wish of the testatrix, which they read between the lines of the will; and had they hesitated before, this circumstance would have been sufficient to make them hold more pertinaciously than ever to their

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decision of persuading Bianca to take the veil in the Convent of the Barberine and in no other.

At last, by dint of pressure and unbending severity, she was induced to enter the noviciate as a postulant by way of experiment, which they assured her in nowise bound her to remain, unless she decided finally to take the vows; and both father and mother repeated to all who spoke to them on the subject that they would never force their child's will, nor oppose her inclinations.

Howbeit, her departure from her home, her leave-taking of Lavinia, and her entrance within the gloomy Convent gave rise to a most heart-rending but silent scene of despair. The Prince and Princess accompanied her to the Convent, and the latter even shed a few tears at the sight of the child's agonised, supplicating face, while the father looked on, as usual, in cold and dignified silence.

The Signora Camilla, who was always everywhere, alone witnessed the final parting when Bianca knelt at their feet to receive their blessing, ere the great door closed and shut her off from all that she loved in the world.

They walked away silently to their carriages, and the Signora Camilla, for the first time in her life, forgot to chatter about the latest news of the day. Her heart was moved to pity, and she took no pains to disguise the expression of her mingled anger and disgust.

For some days this event was generally commented on, and the different appreciations freely expressed were not flattering to the Prince, who had willed or passively submitted to his child's claustration; but as the friends turn from the freshly-closed grave and are caught in the changing, all-absorbing rush and struggle of their own lives before the flowers of the funeral wreath have faded, so poor little Bianca was lost to the memory of man, and left alone in the Convent to fight her cruel inward battle for many long and dreary months.

CHAPTER VII

On the morning immediately succeeding the betrothal Lavinia was called to her mother's room to receive the customary engagement gifts, which had just been sent by her future father-in-law and her betrothed.

These were contained in two large boxes of crimson velvet with convex lids, embroidered in gold and made to imitate the ancient coffers which were formerly used for the same purpose.

In one, which Lavinia opened first, were Don Uberto's offerings, consisting of a row of exquisitely even oriental pearls of medium size, such as she might be allowed to wear during her engagement.

There were, moreover, a great many little bands set with small precious stones of every variety; there was a tiny watch, no larger than Lavinia's thumb-nail, and there were gold hairpins and pins for laces of solitary gems without number.

Lavinia realised with delight that the engagement ring was not there. No doubt he meant to put it upon her finger himself. She had been allowed to chose a plain gold band with a large turquoise as her first gift to Uberto, and this she kept in her pocket, thinking how sweet the exchange would seem when he came at the appointed hour of twelve.

The Marchese Casale's present was of a totally different kind, and infinitely more interesting to the other members of the family, who stood examining it curiously while Lavinia took full possession of Don Uberto's offerings.

Within the other red velvet box lay a chiselled silver coffer of beautiful workmanship. The little key, set with diamonds and sapphires, with its chain of twelve large pink pearls on links of gold, was enclosed in a jewel-case.

Lavinia drew it out and tried the lock, while the family looked on with eager eyes. The lifted lid disclosed a square-folded parchment on which were several seals and characters in Gothic letters.

Though a modern document it was robed in ancient form, signed by the Marchese Oddone Casale and by Don Ferdinando his son, who thereby made known to all men that they legally and of their own free will, being in the enjoyment of their full senses, renounced all future claim to the property and rights of the Vallinfreda estate in favour of Prince Ugo degli Astalli, and in honour of the much-desired alliance between the two families. The document proceeded to state that all stamp duties and expenses — which are very heavy in Italy — regarding this transfer had been duly paid to the Government and Herald's College; and that henceforth Prince Astalli was master of the title, and free to use it or confer it upon his son as he should think best.

Lavinia was deeply touched by this act of delicacy and forethought on the part of her father-in-law, who had for her sake put an end to all future misunderstanding between her family and that of her future husband by an act of generosity which, as she well knew, must have cost his pride dear.

As she slowly and solemnly read the document aloud to her father it did not escape her notice that he was more deeply moved than she had ever before seen him. The old-fashioned law terms sounded strange from those rosy girlish lips, but Lavinia's eyes were grave and dark, and no one could doubt that she fully appreciated their weight. When she ceased reading, her mother and father

embraced her with solemnity, and a very few words were exchanged on the subject. As usual, they thought that whatever they might have to say, Lavinia was too much of a child to be a listener. Don Antonio, who was also present, was the only one to speak.

'Praised be God,' he had the courage to exclaim, 'that the "causa maledetta" has ended peacefully! It is my belief that it has sent many a lawyer to hell, and as many noblemen as I have hairs on my head, since the accursed day when Don Oddone Casale betrayed his cousin Rufo and lost his head for it on the block! But peace to his soul! Let us hope that by his death he expiated his sins in this world instead of in Purgatory.'

Many days had passed since permission had been granted Lavinia to love Uberto, days of joy unalloyed, happily spent in the busy weaving of their love's golden web, while they rejoiced in the splendour of a new sunshine, gently fanned by the sweet breeze of hope breathed upon them out of the cloudless future.

Don Uberto's passion grew stronger and deeper as day by day he looked into the true eyes of his love and learned to read her noble thoughts, her high aspirations, her intense respect for all that was good and just, and her horror of anything like falsehood or unkindness.

His respect for her mother increased, and he learned to feel a deep reverence for Mademoiselle Gilberte, who had led and trained Lavinia's heart so wisely and so well. Notwithstanding many ridiculous prejudices, and an utter want of broadness of mind with regard to all things concerning the world and life as it is in our century, he had to admit that each had contributed much that was good to the formation of her character. Her religion was a beautiful poem to him, and the reading of it strongly attracted him, chasing away the poor scepticism and empty sophistry which had from time to time troubled his active mind.

Regular hours had been appointed for Uberto's visits, according to old consecrated usage; at a set time in the afternoon, when it was not one of the days on which he was expected at luncheon, he was allowed a seat in the Princess's landau, and drove with her and his fiancée. For it was customary, from time immemorial, that betrothed couples should be seen together in the mother's stately carriage during the engagement.

Meanwhile the Princess, who never flinched in doing her duty, found herself obliged to visit all manner of people, connections of the Casale family, whom she despised for their political opinions, and would dread to meet hereafter in her daughter's house. But the distasteful task was wholly unavoidable, since all relations, rich or poor, old or young, within certain degrees, had an equal claim to make acquaintance with the new member of the family.

Three times a week Casale was invited to dine at the Palazzo Astalli, and on the intervening evenings he appeared at nine o'clock, and remained by Lavinia's side until eleven, under the Princess Astalli's untiring supervision. It would have been considered an unprecedented lack of good taste to leave the lovers alone together. And whenever Lavinia's mother was called away by some urgent household matter, she would ring before leaving the drawing-room for a servant, and send word to Mademoiselle Gilberte to come and take her place beside the betrothed, nor was she ever known to go away until the governess had been duly installed.

Strange customs like these are likewise strictly maintained among the lower classes of the Romans; for instance, the lover who has made up his mind to marry a Minente, a girl belonging to that class of the people whose women think it a shame to go about with their heads covered, must begin his suit by obtaining the brothers' consent if she happens to have one or many, or

that of the first cousin, who is called a brother by the people as in the East, and if he is not acceptable to those most important members of the family, no matter how deeply in love the young people may be, it would be dangerous for him to pursue his courtship any further. When once accepted, he is only allowed to see his sweetheart in the presence of her parents and often in that of the brothers, who think it their duty to show their authority by scowling at him so long as his visit lasts.

It is considered good manners for the aspirant to the black-eyed maiden's favour to keep his hands in his pockets when paying his visits, and should he have a cold in his head, and need to make use of his handkerchief, he must leave the room and perform that operation outside the street door.

But not even the strictest maternal vigilance could mar Lavinia's delight in those sotto-voce confabulations in which both seemed to have such endless things to say to each other, though none of us who have lived through such days ourselves can doubt that the happy lovers did but repeat a thousand times the same old, sweet, sad and joyful tale, so lovely to tell, so enchanting to hear.

CHAPTER VIII

WINTER had fled, and the brilliant Roman spring was in the full glow of its hot luxuriant beauty. In the villas the untended flowers bloomed, spread and ran wild like living things. All over the Campagna, from morning until night, the mower from the hills swung his old-fashioned scythe, covering the softly undulating plain with long green waves of fragrant half-dried hay. And following him came the haymakers, rearing their myriads of pointed hay-cocks, till the wide land seemed covered with the tents of the vast invading army, encamped to-day around the walls of Rome, gone to-morrow as by magic, when the swarm of workers had piled up the great yellow and brown stacks by lonely ruined towers and scattered huts, to be landmarks for the year, breaking the dead monotony of the great pasture. And the old masses of brick and stone, raised long ago against the fierce Saracen and fiercer Turk, looked calmly down upon the scene of universal peace.

Through the wide-opened windows of the Roman houses floated the faint intoxicating odour of the new-mown hay, and the soft evening air was pregnant and alive with the germ of the awakening summer, stirring heart and sense to drink and be filled with the life-draught of nature's loving cup.

Those were the happiest days of Lavinia's life. She and Uberto were allowed to roam about the terrace of an evening, with the little sister and the elderly governess, and there for many hours to enjoy the loveliness that surrounded them, while in low murmuring speech,

or in wordless sympathy, they learned all the sweetness of love's harmony, and all that love's silence means.

During the inevitable months of engagement, while Lavinia's trousseau was being made in one of the convents, and the apartment to be occupied by the newly-married couple was being handsomely furnished and decorated by the enthusiastic Marchese Casale, Uberto was initiated into the complicated secrets of an antiquated household where hospitality, like everything else, was regulated by iron rules, and looked upon as a social duty, and never as a pleasure.

Such a view of society was a startling revelation to him. As a bachelor he had only frequented those drawing-rooms where he was sure to be amused, and where he met the gayest and prettiest women in society; not so ferociously proper as to frown at a risky jest, or not respond to a bit of love-making. But in Casa Astalli he was expected to behave very differently. The Princess even went so far as to declare sententiously that he had been sadly spoiled in houses where cosmopolitan usages had nearly obliterated the venerable old Roman customs.

His appearance in the Princess Astalli's drawing-room at her Saturday evening receptions was a great event to all the uncompromising portion of the Black party, who disdained to go where they might be exposed to meeting people belonging to the Whites, and who rarely saw a specimen of the fashionable young man of the day.

He was sufficiently different from the men around him to attract marked attention even apart from the thrilling little halo of rakishness and Liberalism that clung to him, and rather fascinated, as most small horrors do, the young people, married or single, to whom he was presented. His height, and a grace of bearing which denoted an unusual and well-trained strength, his broad white brow, strangely contrasting with the bronzed colour of the rest of his face, his long soft beard of a lighter hue

than his sunburnt complexion, but which had not a tinge of red in it, his bold deep-set eyes, and the rare but winning smile with which he met Lavinia's approving glance — all these particulars of his face and person were duly considered then, and amply discussed afterwards. Soon the young dandies of that part of society began to imitate him; they cut their hair short and brushed it back, and allowed their beards to grow, in the fatuous belief that some day theirs would be as long and silky as Don Uberto Casale's. They tried to copy his walk, his manner of bowing, the cut of his waistcoat and his sleeve-buttons.

Utterly unconscious of his social success, Casale internally marvelled that so many people could wilfully collect together to pass such oppressive evenings, and above all, that they should believe that they were enjoying themselves.

As a rule, these receptions were held in the great red salon; the smaller rooms adjoining were lit up, but generally remained empty, save on some rare occasion when two or three men retired thither to discuss politics.

The tea-table where Donna Lavinia presided, surrounded by all her girl friends, occupied the furthermost corner of the immense room. In one of the opposite angles the elderly matrons congregated, while the young married women assembled in the remaining free space, and timidly moved about amidst their particular female friends. The men stood near the entrance door in a line like a file of black-robed caryatides, whose duty it seemed to be to prevent the crimson damask-hung walls from falling upon the heads of the weaker sex and crushing them. Now and then they would whisper a word to each other, and then relapse into silence. Some one or two of the boldest, by dint of manœuvring and untiring patience, succeeded in breaking through the ranks, and conquering a well-deserved chair beside one of the ladies;

but he had to be very careful not to remain there too long lest his triumph should become a cause of scandal, and draw forth unkind remarks about the lady from the others whom he had not so distinguished.

Notwithstanding the admirable example set him by his elders and betters, Don Uberto could not be induced to form a portion of the black rampart, with the immaculate shirt-fronts, which guarded the door with unchanging and methodical regularity. He hovered about the tea-table, helped Lavinia in the distribution of her cups of tea, and managed to say a few words to every one of the young ladies whom he thought most worthy of compassion. He was even bolder with the elderly ones, especially with those whom he knew to be favourites of Lavinia's, for he would sit beside them and listen for hours to all they had to say, thus gaining for himself a popularity which would otherwise have been denied him, his past life and his father's reputation not being particularly well calculated to elicit the sympathy of his new allies. They loved Lavinia and talked to him about her, and that was enough to satisfy his fastidious taste.

When these intensely dull and aristocratic parties began to break up at about twelve o'clock, with much shaking of hands and searching for wraps, and with many endless farewells, then Uberto craftily steered his course to the tea-table, while the Princess drank her own cup of tea at a distance, surrounded by her especial friends, her duties of hostess being over at last. Once there he could hold forth to Lavinia on his good behaviour during the laboriously heavy evening, till he received his well-earned reward in the shape of a hot punch as he sank into the deep seat by her side. She always prepared the beverage herself, with the tiny slices of lemon and the judiciously measured sugar, and when he had taken the silver-mounted glass from her hands, she helped herself to a cup of tea, and sat down beside him, finding time at

last to exchange tender words and tenderer glances, while doing her best to look very sleepy and unconcerned.

One evening, while watching the retreating figures of the last guests, Lavinia smiled mischievously and looked up into Uberto's face.

'How you have won all their hearts!' she said laughingly. 'It is quite the parable of the lost sheep. Somehow all those good little lambkins are completely neglected now!'

'Ah!' exclaimed Uberto, laughing also, 'it is only because they still fear I am a wolf in sheep's clothing who is going to make a meal of their pet lamb, and they gather round and fawn upon me, while they try to find out whether mine is a golden fleece or not, before admitting me into their fold!'

He had been the lucky hundredth sheep, whom the pretty and young shepherdesses had run after all his life; and as he thought of it, a strange smile, half sad, half contemptuous, floated amidst the gold shadows of his beard. But with Lavinia he kept his own counsel, as a wise man should.

One evening the Princess was seated at her card-table near the corner usually occupied by the young people, playing bezique. Now and then out of mere habit she raised her glasses, cast a vacant glance at the two, and went on with her game. At about ten o'clock she discovered with some surprise that Lavinia was sitting alone on the sofa, busy with her work.

'Where is Uberto?' she asked in astonishment.

'He had an appointment with a friend at the Club at half-past ten,' answered Lavinia, interrupting her work to look at her mother; 'it was about their rowing-match which is soon to come off, you know, and seeing how interested you were in your game he did not like to interrupt you, and slipped out.'

'How very provoking, and how stupid of him!' ex-

claimed the Princess. 'Your father wished me to tell him to have those papers ready to-morrow morning, and to expect him at half-past eight.'

'He only left a moment ago, mamma, may I run and see if I can overtake him and give him papa's message?' asked Lavinia, rising hastily.

'Yes, yes, run quickly, child.'

And before the words were out of her mother's mouth Lavinia had fled through the door.

Uberto was wending his way with slow, reluctant steps through the deserted drawing-rooms, through the throne-room, which led to the ante-chamber, and thence to the vestibule.

He heard the faint sound of the girl's fairy steps and the soft rustling of her skirts like the fluttering of a bird's wings, and he turned to retrace his way.

'Uberto!' she whispered as she glided towards him — a beautiful dark angel robed in white.

She delivered her short message and extended her hand to bid him good-night, but instead of taking it he caught her in his arms, and closing them about her clasped her tenderly to his breast, while he kissed her eyes, her fair brow, and at last her cool ruddy lips.

How he had hungered and longed for that moment! And how many sleepless nights had he not passed dreaming with wide waking eyes of her loveliness, of his mad desire to take her in his arms and kiss her, and of the utter impossibility of even daring to hope for such a thing before the wedding-day. And now, when he least expected it, there she was, alone with him, her heart beating wildly against his, her cheeks burning with shame and delight.

At first she drew back and tried to stiffen her frail willowy body and resist his passionate caresses, but soon she gave way, conquered and passive, wondering and fascinated. He lifted her arms and put them round his

neck, and then she gently tightened them until she made him bend his tall head to the level of hers, and she kissed him on his lips. Then suddenly freeing herself she turned and fled even more rapidly than she had come.

Uberto never afterwards was able to remember how he found his way home that evening.

Lavinia, guileless and unsuspecting, returned to the boudoir, and stood beside her mother's card-table, too agitated to speak, with burning cheeks, her bosom heaving, and her eyes shining like great stars. One look into her face sufficed for the Princess to guess pretty accurately what had happened; but she wisely refrained from asking any questions, and mentally reproached herself for her heedless want of vigilance, resolving to be more cautious in the future and more circumspect in sending affianced daughters through dimly-lighted deserted halls on errands after their betrothed.

This new phase of her love was too acute and strangely bewildering for Lavinia to keep it secret.

She was in that peculiar state of mind when the desire to communicate to others the overflowing fulness of the heart's joy is irrepressible.

She thought that to speak of what had happened would in some way renew the rapture of that moment, and make her live it over again.

She crept into Bianca's room that night, seated herself on her bed, and waited for her to be thoroughly awake before speaking.

'Sorellina,' she whispered, gently stroking Bianca's curly head and very sleepy heavy eyes, 'I have been here these ten minutes trying to wake you.'

Bianca stared at her sister for some seconds with that childishly innocent astonishment which is produced in children's faces by the blending of the last dream with the reality of the awakening.

Bianca succeeded at last in distinguishing the reality from the fiction.

'You have something to tell me? — say it quickly. I am *so* sleepy!' She yawned.

But Lavinia, instead of answering, gazed vacantly at the candle, her lips parted, her soul suddenly as lost to the present as Bianca's had been a few moments before.

'Well? what have you got to tell me?' reiterated Bianca, waxing curious and more wide-awake as Lavinia seemed to grow more sleepy.

Receiving no answer, she sat up in bed and put her arms round her sister's neck. Lavinia thrilled under the caress, and returned fully to herself. She took Bianca's little cool hands and placed them on her hot cheeks.

'Do you feel how my cheeks burn?' she said. 'Uberto kissed me this evening, Sorellina, and his kisses were so sweet that I believe there is no pleasure in Heaven to be compared with them.'

'Mamma was not there, or he would not have dared to kiss you, I am sure,' said Bianca reprovingly. 'You did wrong, Lavinia!'

'Can it be that it was wrong, that it was a sin?' wondered Lavinia. 'I have asked myself that question too. I cannot believe it! Are we not man and wife at heart, and could anything part us to-day? I am truly and verily his own — his, heart and soul, even though the priest has not wedded us. I could never belong to another, and I know that he feels as I do. Why should it be a sin to kiss, then, if it is no sin to love?'

'Ah! but it must be evil!' exclaimed Bianca passionately, almost angrily, 'for I feel utterly overwhelmed and horribly distressed at merely hearing you tell of your kisses and your love. I wish that you had not spoken to me of this — why do you not tell it to mamma instead?'

'I dare not!' quickly answered Lavinia, blushing. 'She would not understand the first word of such things. Did you or I ever see her kiss papa?'

'Why, then, should your love, if not evil, be so different from theirs, which we know must be good?' inquired Bianca.

'But did they ever love each other?'

'If they loved or love,' said the little nun, 'their love differs indeed vastly from yours and Uberto's! But for Heaven's sake do not talk to me any more about it. Do you not see that it robs me of all peace? I have chosen my path in life, and something here' — she put her hand to her heart — 'tells me that I should flee from the sound of voices that beguile me to other loves. Your love unnerves me. Do not speak of it any more!'

'Why should you be so severe with yourself, dear Bianca?' remonstrated Lavinia. 'Are you not free to change your mind, and choose what suits you best?'

'I believe that I am no longer free,' said Bianca sadly, 'for when doubts assail me, and I try to overcome them by saying to myself that I am free, I become more wretched than ever! You feel yourself bound to Uberto, although no outward ceremony has sealed your fate. And so I feel I am bound to my Lord. If the desire to love another man should seize you to-day, you would thrust it from you as a disgrace and an evil temptation. And so if the thought comes to me that I might abandon my vocation and follow your example, I know I must put it away, resist it and overcome it, because it is a wicked suggestion either of my own heart, which is not pure enough, or of our dark enemy.'

Then came another night of unrest and trouble for the one, and of golden dreams for the other. These two young beings, so near and dear to each other, were immeasurably far apart in their feelings and thoughts. Because their natures were generous and their hearts true, they could each sympathise in the other's troubles and sorrows, but they were denied the joy of fully understanding each other's motives.

Bianca's enthusiastic concentrated nature was in danger of a most painful and hazardous metamorphosis. Her conceptions of right and wrong and all her most cherished beliefs were shaken to their foundations by the new flow of idealised earthly aspirations which filled his sister's thoughts and heart. She too began to dream of human happiness, of love shared with another, of wild ecstasies such as she had now and then witnessed in Lavinia, and which far exceeded the spiritual joys she had tasted in her monastic life. She was fast nearing the mark reached by Lavinia the day before she met Uberto, when she had said, 'I feel that if he loves me, I love him.' Her love was quite impersonal, and yet she thought sometimes that she too had brought the cup of Lavinia's happiness to her lips, that she too had tasted of the nectar of life. When her imaginings became too vivid, a violent reaction followed, and her heart, weary of the battle, fainted in her breast, while the better part of her revolted and strove to rise above the materialism of her other self. She longed to possess her soul in peace and quiet, but she was doomed to learn by her own sad experience that human love, the truest and best, can neither sound nor satisfy the fathomless depths of the human heart.

Bianca had to fight her battle alone. Lavinia, thoroughly absorbed by her own passion, was no longer capable of understanding or appreciating the infinitely delicate lights and shadows of her soul, so crystalline and transparent that it was tarnished by the breath of one tainted with human passions. It was well for her that in this crisis of her life she had found a friend and a counsellor capable of leading her — a man as saintly in his own life as he was experienced and worldly-wise in the direction of others; one who understood that his influence should be barely perceptible, and that with a delicate maiden such as was Bianca, the most important

point to gain was to inspire her with confidence in her own strength, and by gentle words to prevent her from withdrawing still further within herself. Hers was a strange conscience, in which the heroic fanaticism and blind faith of another age blended with the humane positivism of her own generation.

Her spiritual director did not think himself called upon to encourage her vocation to become a Sister of Charity, or to crush entirely her aspirations towards a married life such as awaited Lavinia. He simply bade her be patient and of good heart, but exhorted her to neither fight against the one thought nor encourage the other, and to leave to Heaven the unravelling of the obscurities she encountered in her own heart, and which prevented her from reading clearly therein. She was neither doing wrong nor offending God, he told her, because she was harassed by conflicting desires. The most sensitive, delicate natures are those most tried by such fire. The truer the heart, the deeper the suffering in this world; and to many such as she, life was but one long wail of woe. She was to seek rest and peace in prayer.

There were days when Bianca entered the confessional, a volcano in her breast, and returned home pacified and resigned, trusting to the promises of the good man who assured her that she would not be tempted beyond her strength. It was true comfort to be able to tell her secret woes, lay bare all her heart to some one who knew the meaning of such miseries, and was not easily surprised or scandalised.

CHAPTER IX

THE Prince and Princess Astalli had long since issued from their stately alcove on the following Monday morning, and after the early mass in the chapel were each pursuing their usual occupations in different parts of the vast palace.

In a whitewashed vaulted room, situated on the ground-floor, the Prince sat before a high writing-table surrounded by clerks, who occupied desks resembling his own, but of smaller proportions. They were busy writing down in large books the minute details of the complicated administration of the Astalli property. Over the door of this hall, which opened upon the court of the palace for the convenience of all those who came to transact business affairs, was written in large letters — 'Computisteria dell' Eccellentissima Casa Astalli,' the title of Excellency having been as much a right and a privilege as that of Prince in the olden times.

At the end of each year these different volumes were carried into the archives, a still larger room adjoining the computisteria, and stored away on shelves, to the edges of which were affixed the dates, year after year, for convenience in future reference.

These books were primitively bound, and each had three leathern straps sewed across the vellum back with coarse twine, the whole forming a regular library, beginning almost in the dark ages, and continuing without interruption to the present era. The parchments and different documents considered too old and precious to be bound, were loosely stored in portfolios exactly

resembling the books, but closed in on all sides like a box, to prevent the dust and moths from destroying them.

In some of these old volumes were registered the births, marriages, and deaths, with the various expenses incurred by the family for baptisms, weddings, or funerals. In others the patents of nobility — the administration of justice or baronial rights in the different fiefs, before these privileges were abolished. But in most of these worm-eaten manuscripts were recorded the leases of the lands, the sale of the crops, and the daily expenses of the family. In one corner of the room there was a high carved desk resembling the 'Pluteus' in the church choirs from which the choristers sing the Hours, and before it stood an old man who for over forty years had recorded in a great volume, which might be compared to the book of the seven seals in the Apocalypse, the principal events of each day in the Astalli household. This journal was intended to complete the collection of diaries already existing.

Prince Astalli passed most of his mornings in busying himself about the minutest particulars of his income and details of the daily expenses. He was parsimonious and careful, as are most men in a country where fortunes are not easily made, and when once lost can never be recovered.

There was also a writing-table in the room destined for Don Clemente, his son; but this was simply *pro forma*, for he was invariably dismissed when any important business transaction took place, his father alleging extreme youth and inexperience as an excuse for his jealousy about such matters, though the young man was three-and-twenty. This was usual with most Romans of his time, even when their sons had reached the respectable age of forty. The Prince had just closed an account-book, and was looking through a mass of various papers when one of the clerks handed him a telegram. He

opened it, rose hastily from his high-backed chair and left the room through the secret door, to ascend a winding stairway cut in the thickness of the wall which led to the apartment above. When on the landing of the first floor, he opened another little door, and found himself in the Princess's presence. She was seated in the deep sunny embrasure of the window in her morning-room, a wooden frame before her, on which was stretched a white silk chasuble she was embroidering with gold. She looked up inquiringly on seeing him, and waited for him to speak.

'Here is a despatch from Uberto, sent from the station of Termini,' he said, handing her the little yellow square paper. 'His father is dangerously ill in Bologna, and he was leaving Rome by the first morning train.'

'Dio mio!' exclaimed the Princess, pushing away her frame with her feet, 'how very dreadful! I wonder,' she continued after a short pause, 'if this is going to make any difference as regards Lavinia's marriage?'

'I fancy not,' answered her husband thoughtfully. 'Casale is a strong man, and was never ill in his life, that I know; he will pull through this illness, no doubt. It is scarcely worth while to anticipate unpleasant eventualities.'

Not a word of sympathy, not a kind or hopeful thought was exchanged between them for the man who was soon to become a second father to their daughter and the grandfather of their grandchildren — much less for Uberto himself. They sat opposite each other, quietly talking of the Marchese Casale's life, of his second wife, Uberto's mother, whom they had never known, of his fortune and his detestable politics, when suddenly they heard beneath their windows the shrill voice of a newsboy giving the names of the morning's papers, and amongst the latest news the announcement of the death of the great Roman patriot, the Marchese Casale di Vallinfreda. They in-

stinctively started to their feet, rushed to the window, and stood breathlessly waiting to hear the vender repeat his cry, which would either confirm their doubts or clear them away. The newsboy, heavily laden with an armful of half-folded papers, flourished an open sheet in the faces of the few passers with his free hand. He was just under the window, and in his nasal drawling tones repeated his cry: 'Buy the *Popolo Romano*, with the latest news of the death of the Roman patriot.'

There could no longer be a doubt; the Prince rang the bell for a servant, and bade him buy all the morning papers. The order was so unusual that the bewildered man looked twice at the Princess in doubt and perplexity. Then he fled precipitately to obey. No newspapers except the *Osservatore Romano* and the *Voce della Verita*, the two important Clerical organs, had ever been allowed to penetrate within the palace.

From the telegrams they learned that the Marchese Casale had died of apoplexy in the city of Bologna during the early hours of the morning. This concise announcement was followed by a short biography, recalling his patriotic adventures, his conspiracies under the papal government, and his long exile.

Neither of the readers of these particulars gave signs of much regret for the death of Uberto's father. The diversity of their political opinions had rendered all intimacy an impossibility, and their intercourse with him had been limited to the absolutely unavoidable necessities exacted by society.

A few words expressing the hope that his past iniquities — which they knew to be as innumerable as the sands of the sea — had been forgiven him, and that his soul might rest in peace, ended the obituary notice.

What principally occupied their thoughts was the change this unforeseen event must needs bring about in the lives of the young couple. Henceforth Uberto would

be master of his own fortune, free to live as he pleased and where it best pleased him. With the death of the Marchese Casale all the laboriously combined clauses of the marriage contract were annulled. Don Uberto would no longer be expected to live in common with his brother's family, or even to occupy the apartment which his father had been furnishing for him with so much loving generosity. It was well known that the deceased Marchese owned several palaces in Rome; Uberto would probably decide to live in whichever of these fell to his lot in the division of the property, and Lavinia would be sole mistress in her own house, instead of being dependent on a reckless unprincipled father-in-law and the rather stupid wife of the first son.

Prince Astalli had bemoaned the fact that Lavinia would have no mother-in-law to keep her subjected after leaving her father's roof. Now that the Marchese Casale had disappeared, there was no reason why Lavinia's mother should not gather up the reins and drive the inexperienced young couple as she considered best, thereby retaining her full authority over her daughter.

Little by little the enumeration of the great advantages this unexpected event was to procure to their child so elated their hearts, that both the Princess and her husband forgot completely the sad event which was the immediate cause of so much prosperity. With each sharp jerking advance of the gilt second hand of the great old timepiece on the marble shelf, their satisfaction and contentment increased. If now and then an uncomfortable, ill-defined sensation clutched their hearts, they took great pains to quiet their consciences by assuring each other repeatedly that all they said was only meant to express their deep gratitude to kind Providence, whose decisions they pronounced to be always, but more especially on this occasion, both wise and just.

They were recalled to the immediate reality by La-

vinia's sudden appearance before them. She came in like a sunbeam, her eyes sparkling, the colour in her cheeks a shade deeper than usual — perhaps with the memory of the sweet assurances exchanged in secret with Uberto on the previous evening. Bianca followed, looking worn and sad, with deep circles round her hazel eyes.

'I do not see Uberto!' exclaimed Lavinia, looking around with a bright joyous smile, that smote her mother's heart for one brief instant. 'It is nearly half-past twelve. He should have been here these ten minutes at least!'

There was a quick exchange of guilty glances between her parents, but neither of them found words to answer her interrogative exclamation. They had completely forgotten Uberto and his dead father in their imaginary flights into the golden future, and it took them several moments to realise that they were not only ruthlessly dragged back to unpleasant facts, but that it was imperatively necessary to break the news of Uberto's absence as gently as possible to Lavinia, informing her at the same time of his father's death.

The Prince was the first to speak.

'My child, Uberto has been unexpectedly called to Bologna to see his father, who was taken ill ——'

Lavinia turned very white; she drew nearer to her father, and laying her hand on his arm whispered slowly, 'What else have you heard?'

'Alas, my child,' said the Prince in a solemn voice, 'Uberto will be there too late to see his father alive.'

'Ah! povero Uberto mio!' she moaned, as she covered her face with her hands and began to sob aloud. 'It will break his heart — he loved his father so dearly, and I am not there to comfort him — O my poor Uberto! ——'

Prince and Princess Astalli looked at each other in blank astonishment, while Bianca gently led her sister to a sofa and sat down beside her.

Why, in Heaven's name, they asked themselves, should

Lavinia behave in such a way about the death of a gentleman she had scarcely spoken to half a dozen times? He was neither a relation nor an intimate friend of their family, and this violent outburst of grief was most uncalled for and undignified.

'Dio mio, what a flood of tears!' exclaimed the Princess petulantly, after watching her child for some moments.

Luncheon had been announced, — the 'omelette aux fines herbes' was cooling, and would not be fit to eat. Don Clemente and his tutor, who had joined the family circle, were just as hungry as the Prince, and even more impatient to end this unbecoming scene, and yet Lavinia's tears continued to flow copiously — and then Bianca's too — and even Mademoiselle Gilberte's ridiculous, ugly, wrinkled old features were beginning to show unmistakable signs of sympathy for the two girls. Decidedly, there was no chance of moving into the dining-room at that moment. The Princess waxed angry and her face became hard.

'We are very sorry for this, of course,' she said with pinched and discontented lips, 'but is it reasonable of you to grieve thus for the death of a person who was almost a stranger to you?'

'He was Uberto's father,' sobbed Lavinia, 'and he loved him better than any one else on earth, and no one so dear to him could be a stranger to me. I know that Uberto is suffering at this moment! Is not his sorrow mine?'

Her tears were indeed out of place in that glacial atmosphere, where every kind of sentiment which extended beyond the family circle or the subject of religion was considered as a morbid weakness. Lavinia realised that she need expect neither sympathy nor forbearance, so she dried her eyes as best she could, and silently withdrew to her own room. Once there, and the doors

closed to all intruders, she wrote a long letter to Uberto. It was her first letter to her lover, and although she knew that her mother would read it, she allowed her heart to speak freely, and in tender delicate expressions she opened to him the depths of her love in her sorrow for his sorrow.

A week passed before Don Uberto Casale could think of returning to Rome. The funeral had taken place on the third day, and had been made very grand and imposing by the amalgamation of religious ceremonies with the patriotic display of banners belonging to the different civil corporations of which the Marchese Casale had been a conspicuous member, and by the attendance of the official representatives of the army, the commune, and the government, besides his household and his many friends.

When the most important and pressing business affairs concerning his father's fortune had been duly attended to by the two brothers, Don Uberto wrote a long letter to Lavinia, which he inclosed in one to Prince Astalli, announcing his return on the following morning.

There being much uncertainty as to the hour he would choose for paying his first visit, orders were issued at the Palazzo Astalli that no one save Don Uberto Casale would be received on that day; and the young ladies were told that they were not to leave their rooms, unless their presence was requested by the Princess, their mother.

Eight long days had now passed since the Marchese's death, and notwithstanding their constant and ingenious efforts, neither of Lavinia's parents had succeeded in discovering any particulars regarding the deceased nobleman's will. Great curiosity and not a little anxiety disturbed their slumbers by night, and by day increased their eagerness for Don Uberto's return. Time seemed to hang heavily on their hands as they sat counting the

hours, the minutes, and the seconds until he should finally appear to justify their expectations.

At about four o'clock Don Uberto Casale was introduced into the Princess's boudoir. He was in deep mourning, and the traces of recent suffering were clearly visible in his face. His eyes were heavy and dull, his complexion of that peculiar untransparent whiteness which follows a succession of sleepless and harrowing nights, and his head drooped slightly forward.

While shaking hands with the Prince and Princess, who had moved towards him with many expressions of sympathy for his great loss, and regrets at seeing him so pale and worn, he gave way to a good deal of emotion, but he soon mastered this show of weakness, and began to speak of his father, of his goodness and generosity, his deep love for him, and his great grief at having reached Bologna too late to see him alive, in unaffected and simple terms, which seemed deeply to impress his listeners. He told them of the popular tribute of affection and respect to his father offered by the entire population of his adopted home, and of his many charities to the poor of the city, which had only become known after his death.

When all these particulars had been delivered and listened to with deference, the Prince adroitly turned the conversation to the worldly interests of the family, and in a voice which he endeavoured to render indifferent, inquired if the Marchese had left a will, and if Uberto had become acquainted with its contents.

Uberto hesitated a moment. He was going to make a disagreeable plunge into dark and unknown depths, and he dreaded it. But he had a brave heart and soon regained his composure.

'My father left no will,' he said very quietly, and looking the Prince full in the face, 'but amongst his papers we found a perfectly legal cession of his life

interest in the entail of the entire Casale fideicommissum to my brother Ferdinando. This legal act, drawn up in perfectly regular form, is dated and signed in Rome in the year 1870, before the promulgation of the Italian law which abrogated all entailments, and de facto made the heir-apparent master of half the entailed property, which under the old régime he would only have inherited entire at his father's death. By this act my brother became virtually proprietor of everything — of the real estate, the fiefs, palaces, jewels, and all the objects of art, which otherwise according to the new law of 1871 should have been divided between us. In one word, he inherits everything, and I inherit — nothing!'

He had said more than enough to make the case quite clear to them, and he ceased speaking to give himself full leisure to watch the result of his words on his audience. The effect was indeed tremendous. Both the Prince and his wife seemed thunderstruck, and so utterly incapable of mastering their disappointment, that Uberto, for the first time since he had fully realised his position, began to grow seriously alarmed as to the consequences this change might produce to his future happiness.

He had of course been greatly shocked himself on learning that his father had left him almost nothing. But with the sanguine elasticity of youth, and a carelessness about money, which was the natural consequence of his never having been made to feel the want of it, he soon consoled himself with the thought that the woman he loved would care as little about such sordid questions as he did, and that his fortune, now reduced to his mother's small portion, would suffice them, provided they were united. It was not possible as yet fairly to estimate what free property his father had left, which would have to be equally divided between himself and his brother. But of one thing he felt sure, that Lavinia was not a woman to shrink or recoil before the modest

position that would now fall to her lot, instead of the luxurious and envied one she had expected to be hers when she promised to marry him. He firmly believed that she would be just as happy in a small house, without horses or footmen, or any of the rich paraphernalia of the Palazzo Casale, provided the unpretending home was shared with him, and if a moment of sadness darkened his bright dream, it was simply because it would no longer be in his power to heap riches and luxuries upon her he loved.

Uberto was immensely ingenuous; in time and by hard experience he was to learn that life is one thing seen through the eyes of a poor man, but quite another from the rich one's point of view, and that money is much, if not quite everything in this world. Just now he found himself facing an unforeseen difficulty in the resentful animosity of his future father and mother-in-law. He read in their sternly eloquent and solemn silence their disapproval of his father's act, and this stirred his wrath against them, even though he could not but admit to himself that they had reason to feel that they had been deceived.

'In this document,' he went on to explain, as if trying to apologise for the seeming injustice of which they tacitly accused the man he had loved so dearly, 'my father fully explains his intentions. He meant to try and preserve during another generation the fortune and lustre of his family, and provide for me by accumulating yearly a portion of his income, which at his death was to make me rich and independent. Since my engagement to Donna Lavinia he has spoken several times to me of his desire to make his will. I doubt not that his journey to Bologna had something to do with this, for he told me on the evening of his departure that he was going on important business which he was anxious to settle before my marriage. Death alone prevented his

doing for me all that a loving father could do, and no one' — this he said slowly and emphatically — 'has a right to hold him responsible for not having accomplished his wish, or to be so heartless as to cast a shadow of blame on the memory of one whom sudden death alone has prevented from acting justly.'

'Have you fully realised, my dear Uberto,' said the Prince, glancing quickly at his wife, 'how immensely changed your position is to-day?'

'The change is immense!' exclaimed Uberto impetuously, 'and I fully realise it — not for myself, for I do not care in the least about such things — but it grieves me sadly for Lavinia's sake. She will have to make up her mind to do without the thousand luxuries and superfluities I should have loved to give her!'

'Pray, tell us then, Don Uberto, what you have decided to do under these painful circumstances?' asked the Princess with pinched lips and her hardest stare, which had now become familiar to Casale.

'To do?' he cried aghast. 'To do? — why, to marry Lavinia as soon as possible! She loves me well enough to share my changed fortunes, and you know how I adore her. We shall be perfectly happy without all that money!'

'It is all very well for you young people to reason thus,' rejoined the Prince; 'you have no more foresight than a song-bird on a twig, but to us elders is given the faculty of considering things with that prudence which is lacking in you — and we shall decide otherwise ——'

'Prince Astalli, what do you mean?' asked Uberto frowning ominously, while a deep flush spread over his features.

'I mean,' pursued the Prince with cold dignity as he rose from his seat, 'that however distasteful it may be to have to add another sorrow to those of the past week, I consider it my duty to inform you at once of my decision in this matter, and to cut short your illusions.'

The Prince paused and glanced at the face of his listener. The frown was still there, but the pallor of death had succeeded the angry flush, and not a sound passed the blanched and slightly parted lips.

'Could you inform me,' he continued haughtily, 'of the manner in which you intend to support a wife of Lavinia's birth and social standing, after what you have told us of your poverty-stricken position?'

Don Uberto sprang to his feet, almost glad that they offered him an opportunity of resenting their implied disparagement upon his father's action by treating him with contempt.

'Per Dio,' he cried, 'that is my affair.'

'You will allow, at least,' said the Princess suavely, 'that it is but natural that we should feel anxious about our daughter's future?'

'Your daughter's future is that of my wife. I am fully capable of taking care of it myself. Nor do I intend that any one should meddle with my rights.'

'Gently, gently, my dear Casale!' said the Prince; 'you are in love, and, like all lovers, your reasoning is slightly lacking in logic. By what you would call a sad fatality of destiny Lavinia is our child, and as yet she is *not* your wife, therefore' — he turned towards the Princess as if to accentuate his assertion by implying that he spoke also in her name — 'therefore it is our duty to protect her interests. We consider it an act of conscience to withdraw from the promise made to your deceased father — and we expect you to do the same.'

While listening to the Prince, Uberto was trying to master his temper and resist the temptation that seized him to forget the outward respect due to those elderly persons who, by some inconceivable freak of nature, were the parents of such a girl as Lavinia.

'I shall certainly never withdraw the promise I plighted to Donna Lavinia,' he said, controlling the low tones of

his voice admirably. 'As for yours, exchanged with my father, you may take it back or leave it as suits you best. It is not of the least weight or consequence to me — nor to your daughter either, for that matter. The engagement you are attempting to break off to-day exists solely between Donna Lavinia and myself, and no one else on earth has power to annul it.'

'Your language is enigmatically absurd, Casale!' exclaimed the Prince. 'Your marriage, like all other marriages, was arranged between your deceased father — requiescat in pace — and myself. To-day it suits my pleasure to release myself from the promise made on that day, and I appeal to you, as your father's immediate representative, to sanction my demand. Between gentlemen of our caste, as you well know, it is customary for the other party to comply readily with similar delicate requests.'

'You are labouring under a very great mistake, Prince,' rejoined Casale. 'The marriage contract agreed upon by my father and yourself was drawn up simply to satisfy your old-fashioned mania for form and ritual; it really had not the slightest weight in my eyes, and had it so pleased me I would have burned it unhesitatingly the day after you had drawn it up! Long before you made it, I had told Donna Lavinia that I loved her, and I asked her to marry me if she felt quite sure that she could return my affection, telling her that otherwise the whole carefully-worded arrangement which lay ready to be signed in the computisteria should be destroyed. I even said to her at the time that the only true and binding engagement was our troth, and since then I have repeated it to her many times in these very rooms. I know she thinks as I do about such things, and I feel fully authorised to assure you in her name, as well as my own, that we will neither of us break off our engagement.'

'My dear Casale,' said the Princess persuasively, 'it is extremely difficult to follow your sophistries! Never did an Astalli — a girl of eighteen! — dispose of herself in the manner you insinuate. Nor can I believe that Lavinia would even desire to do anything so contrary to family traditions as sacred to our children as they are to us. You wish to make me suppose that these new manners and customs to which you allude have actually found their way into our old Roman houses, but let me assure you that so long as we live, and with God's help, none shall ever penetrate into mine!'

'At the time when marriages were managed as you wish to manage ours, neither Lavinia nor I were born, Signora Principessa!' rejoined Uberto.

'You have learned all this sentimental nonsense in those dreadful French novels,' sighed the Princess. She looked at Casale as a sorrowing mother does at a naughty child. 'And now you are regulating your actions and manners according to their idiotic maxims. Thank Heaven,' she added proudly, 'Lavinia has never read a romance in her life!'

'I beg your pardon, Princess, Lavinia has read one.'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed that lady irately.

'I mean,' said Uberto, 'that she has read with me the great romance of life — that of love, and when that has once been read it is not to be forgotten.'

'My dear boy, you are still very young at heart, I see. Lavinia will forget her little romance — or rather, we will make her forget it,' said the Princess.

'That is still to be seen,' answered Uberto, losing patience. 'Pray, have Donna Lavinia called, and in my presence ask her if she wishes to withdraw her promise, or to forget our past.'

'What would be the use of provoking another scene?' interposed Prince Astalli; 'the present one is sufficiently distasteful. She knows nothing of our decision. We

will use all prudence in communicating it to her, and time will do the rest.'

'Do you mean to say,' faltered Uberto, suddenly looking very much in earnest, 'that I am to leave this room without seeing Lavinia?'

'It must be so,' answered the Prince. 'To expose her to the wrenching sorrow of a parting, which circumstances render final, would be cruel weakness on our part. She will be sufficiently grieved as it is without our increasing her sorrow by allowing her to see you again.'

'Per Dio!' cried Uberto exasperated, 'and you believe that I will submit to this? — that I will quietly resign myself to your decision and accept it as final? I swear to you by the sacred memory of my father that I will see Lavinia again, and will hold myself bound to her until she bids me with her own lips withdraw my word!'

The Princess was shocked and alarmed. Uberto had lost all self-control and was now threatening them in passionate wrath. She scarcely knew what to say to end the painful interview, and get rid of his presence, for she felt it would be imprudent on their side to let him depart in anger. She made an attempt to calm him by pointing out his lack of courtesy.

'You are threatening us with a public scandal, if I am not mistaken,' she said contemptuously, 'and your expressions are little short of coarse. Love, such as you profess, is a prerogative of peasants, who use their knives as arguments in family discussions. I abhor vulgarity, and for the last half hour, Don Uberto, you have been treating us to a very fair specimen of it.'

'Casale,' interrupted the Prince, moving towards the low chair on which he sat, his face buried in his hands, 'you must promise us, for the dignity of your name and ours, that you will do nothing so rash and disgraceful as to attempt to speak to our daughter out of our presence.'

'Signor Principe,' said Uberto, rising and taking his hat from the neighbouring table, 'I will promise nothing — all is fair in love and war,' — and with a profound bow to the Princess he left the room.

CHAPTER X

A DEAD silence succeeded this animated scene. Both the Prince and Princess Astalli stood looking at each other in mute bewilderment. The rupture of the engagement had been more violent and unexpected than they had wished, and now that it was done, they felt rather ashamed of themselves. Would it not have been better to have waited for a more favourable opportunity, or to have found some plausible excuse, and thus avoided the brutal precipitancy of their proceeding?

Now that her blood was cooling, after Don Uberto's departure, the Princess began to feel very uncomfortable. Had she, in the heat of the discussion, avoided that same taint of vulgarity which she had been so prompt to impute to Casale's actions? Her fear of having been found lacking in the outward form was infinitely more galling to her than the wreck of Lavinia's happiness.

She sat meditating on Don Uberto Casale's unexpected resistance. Of course she had not believed that he would like being shown to the door — that he should be angry at first and then implore them to reconsider their decision was only natural — but that he should dare refuse to comply with their wishes — should fight the point and leave them with a threat which still rankled in their hearts like a poisoned wound — this was unbearable torture. She shook her head several times dismally and looked at her husband.

'What is to be done, Ugo?' she asked presently. 'He is capable of any enormity just now. His passion for Lavinia will lead him into committing every kind of

romantic absurdity. He means to go on loving our daughter in his modern fashion, publicly — and we cannot, as in the peaceful old times, take her to a convent and leave her there till the storm has blown over —— '

'You forget, my dear,' rejoined the Prince, 'that difficulties of this sort were not peacefully settled even in those days, and it sometimes happened that while the girl was cloistered, her brothers and the forsaken lover exchanged sword-cuts and dagger-thrusts in the streets.'

'Of course I do not mean to say that all was perfect then! Each epoch has its good and its bad points. But I do believe that of all times these are the most frightfully wicked and God-forsaken. Am I not right?'

'Quite so, my dear,' acquiesced her husband. 'But bad as they are, we must live in them, and it would be folly to attempt to introduce the customs of the past. Lavinia must not be taken to a convent, especially after that stupid scandal about Bianca's exit from one. All we can do is to watch Lavinia jealously, and send a trustworthy friend to Casale to pacify him by persuasive means, and to try and induce him to desist from any further pursuit of his aim.'

They were indeed people of another age who could thus quietly discuss the evils of the present day, form projects for the future regarding Casale's obstinate behaviour, and totally forget what should really have been their chief preoccupation — the happiness of their gentle child, who did not yet know that her own parents had ended her dream of happiness.

At last they thought of her, and decided that it would be proper to inform her briefly of what had occurred, studiously omitting all particulars. It would be highly imprudent, they concluded, to acquaint her with the details of their final interview with Don Uberto. Nothing was more infectious than the spirit of revolt; and should Lavinia come to know that he still considered

himself engaged to her, she would take it into her head to do as he had done, and no one could tell how far he had succeeded in enlightening her as to his very modern views concerning the education of parents.

The Princess thought that a few words would be enough. Just as Lavinia had been bidden one day to put on her white gown because her betrothed was to be presented to her; so to-day, had she stood at the foot of the altar, clothed in bridal dress, the veil upon her brow and the orange blossoms in her hair, awaiting the bridegroom — a word from her mother should have sufficed to send her back, unwedded, but patient and resigned, from the altar-steps to her father's house. The Prince was not of the same opinion. He recalled with uneasiness Uberto's bold, unshaken faith in Lavinia's love, for which he vouched fearlessly as for his own. They had been careless, not to say incautious, in allowing their daughter to converse freely with him out of their hearing, and not to have incessantly instilled into her heart a horror of his new maxims when he was not present. Now, it was too late, and it was to be greatly feared that she was already tainted with his free way of thinking. The Prince tried to explain to his wife that under the circumstances it would be more advisable to use persuasive arguments to induce Lavinia to submit to the unavoidable rather than violently to cross her will, lest the seed of independence sown in her heart should suddenly come to maturity and breed greater and more dangerous complications. He was fain to admit that she was no longer a child, and that her face showed symptoms of a determined character and a strong will. Though he never for an instant doubted that he must infallibly triumph in this unequal battle, yet to save time and trouble, and avoid a public scandal, he advised a cautious, prudent, and secret line of conduct.

Though agreeing perfectly in principle, the Prince was

less passionate than his wife in his manner of applying those same magnificent rules to everyday life. Had he been a Liberal member of the Italian parliament, he would have been called an 'Opportunist.'

It is customary to have recourse to some ecclesiastical dignitary under similar circumstances — a cardinal, a monsignore, a bishop, or even the Holy Father himself, if the question to be solved is very grave. Lavinia being a mere child, and the difficulty of an intimate character, Don Antonio, the chaplain, was considered a sufficiently important personage.

Poor Don Antonio! When informed that he was to break the woeful news to Lavinia, his blood froze in his veins. Never in all his life had he been embarked upon so painful an undertaking. In his priestly ministry he had often been obliged to inform the sick that death was nigh; he had helped many to bear the end bravely. But what was that compared with the agony he was about to inflict on that loving, trusting young creature, who as yet had tasted none of the bitterness and disappointments of life, and who lived in the happy belief that death alone could part her from the man she loved?

He implored the Prince and Princess to exonerate him from the painful duty. But his prayers received no answer. He, like the rest of the household, had been passively subject to the absolute authority of the masters, and when once convinced that it was inevitable, he tried to console himself with the thought that he could by tact and delicacy render the blow less painful than if it were dealt by the unloving hand of a stranger.

Bianca and Lavinia had remained all day in their rooms, according to orders received. The lagging hours crawled wearily by, but they dared not ask any explanation of their seclusion. An officious servant informed them of Don Uberto's presence, and after a while of his departure, and their wonder turned to amazement when

they became convinced that he had really been allowed to leave the house without seeing his betrothed. Lavinia gradually grew more silent and despondent; a gnawing uneasiness forced her to move from one chair to another, making work or reading impossible. Bianca sought to invent plausible excuses for Uberto's hasty departure, but without success. Lavinia's anguish increased as time went on, and she received no summons to adjourn to her mother's sitting-room.

Don Antonio opened the door of the study with a quiet 'Buona sera.' It was late in the afternoon, and the golden dust of the setting sun was penetrating in slanting bars through the half-closed blinds. The girls rose to meet him, but as the changing lights and shadows fell on his long white hair and regular features, usually so open and peaceful, they started back and stood still, looking at him. A cloud seemed to hang over the clear blue eyes, and his gait was uncertain and weary. He sat down beside the table, and clasping his hands within the deep folds of the sleeves of his cassock, let his head sink on his breast.

'What is the matter, Don Antonio? Are you feeling ill?' asked Lavinia anxiously.

'I am not ill, my dear figliuola, but my heart is heavy. I am the bearer of sad news, and the weight of it makes me feel ten years older.'

'You are the bearer of sad news?' inquired Bianca, suddenly becoming alarmed as she instinctively drew nearer to Lavinia for protection. 'Am I to be sent back to the Barberine?'

'My evil tidings concern Lavinia,' he answered, turning to the latter. 'You must gather your courage, my child, and try to be valiant and strong, for you will have to taste of the bitterness of life, which is the share of all——'

'Something has happened to Uberto!' burst out La-

vinia. 'Spare us your sermon, Don Antonio — tell me the truth at once. Has he been taken ill? — oh, please tell me what has happened!'

'No, no,' hastily put in the priest, 'Uberto is quite well.'

'Ah, che piacere!' exclaimed Lavinia, with a deep sigh of relief. 'You may go on with those edifying reflections, Don Antonio, for no other tidings can disturb me now!' And she laughed as she again sat down before him.

'You are wrong, Lavinia; a great woe has befallen you both. Your happiness as well as his will be crushed by what I have to tell you.'

She looked uneasily for a moment at his pale, sad countenance, and nervously rose again to her feet; but the predominant expression on her face was that of incredulity. What had she to fear, after all? Uberto was well; she was sure of his love as he was of hers. What mattered the rest?

'My child,' continued Don Antonio in a very solemn voice, 'the Marchese Casale's death was a great misfortune in more ways than one, since time was not given him to do what he intended for Don Uberto. No will has been found, but only a cession of his life-interest in the old entail to Ferdinando, his eldest son. As the act is dated before the abolition of primogeniture, the entire Casale fortune belongs to Don Ferdinando, and Don Uberto is left almost penniless. Your father, considering him no longer a suitable match for a maiden of your birth, has thought it wise to withdraw the promise of marriage exchanged between the Marchese Casale and himself some months ago. He has just informed Uberto of his decision, and has requested me to be the bearer of this sad news to you.'

The old man's strength and courage were exhausted. Even had it been necessary to say more, it would have

been a moral impossibility for him to add another word.

Lavinia listened intently while he spoke, her great eyes stony and dilated, her lips parted, her face rigid and colourless as that of a corpse. Not a sound was to be heard in the cool bare room.

She clasped her hands to her bosom, her breathing grew heavier, until it changed into long deep sobs.

'Does Uberto ——?' she faltered, and then fell as one dead, to her full length.

The effort to speak had been too great, and this final closing of the scene was so sudden and unexpected that Bianca had not time to reach her sister before she heard the dull thud of her heavy braids upon the brick floor. She attempted to lift the lifeless form, calling loudly to Mademoiselle Gilberte, who rushed in from the adjoining room, while Don Antonio grasped the bell-ropes in each of the deserted halls through which he sped on his wild career towards the servants' hall. Once there he raised his voice, and the great vault rang with his pitiful cry of 'Ajuto, Ajuto!'

Lavinia's parents, who had been waiting in the library for Don Antonio's return to learn the result of his thankless mission, emerged from one of the many doors and anxiously inquired what had happened. In an instant the study was filled with frightened maids and eager servants, who gathered round the fainting figure, watching and helping Donna Bianca and Mademoiselle Gilberte with cold water and salts.

They lifted the young girl gently and placed her on the sofa, which had been pushed to the centre of the room. At the foot stood the mother, watching what the others were doing, and beside her the faithful, tender-hearted, old priest. Tears streamed down his rugged cheeks, while with joined hands he prayed to God to have mercy upon the poor child.

A full quarter of an hour passed thus. Who does not

know how long such minutes seem, when nothing can be done to shorten them?

Bianca knelt beside her sister. The raven's-wing blackness of Lavinia's tresses, which she unpinned and spread over the white pillow under her head, increased by contrast her deathly look. Her father moved nearer and anxiously bent over her, peering into her lifeless face.

'It is only a faint,' whispered his wife reassuringly in his ear, so as not to be overheard by the maids. 'She will soon be herself again. It is perfectly natural that she should have received a severe shock on learning this news so unexpectedly.'

'Mio Dio, mio Dio,' gasped Don Antonio, 'if only I have not killed her!'

'I am surprised at you, Don Antonio,' said the Princess, turning sharply on him. 'As a priest you should know better. Grief never killed anybody.'

At that moment Lavinia heaved a great sigh, opened her eyes, and then closed them again. Bianca pressed her little, cold, clammy hand and murmured endearing words in her attempt to hasten her return to consciousness, and the Princess, on seeing her give this first sign of life, with an imperious gesture dismissed the servants, who hastily retreated. Again Lavinia opened her eyes and looked about her with a vague and placid expression, as if awakening from a childish dream. She lifted her eyebrows inquiringly when she saw Bianca kneeling beside her, and smiled.

'What is the matter, Sorellina?'

'Nothing, dearest,' answered Bianca soothingly. 'You have had a faint, and it frightened us a little, but thank God you are yourself now.'

'I have fainted? — and at what?' asked Lavinia in bewilderment. 'I never fainted before — how very strange!' She pressed the palms of her hands to her

temples to concentrate her thoughts, then lifted her head and looked about her. At the foot of the couch stood the black-robed priest.

'Don Antonio!' she exclaimed, 'what are you doing here?' and then as she watched his pained and anxious face, her thoughts wandered back to the immediate past, and the agonised expression returned in her eyes. She was again living over those moments that had preceded her unconsciousness, and her brain was grasping the broken ends of her thoughts and binding them together. 'Does Uberto love me still?' she asked slowly, completing the interrupted sentence. 'Will he be true to me, notwithstanding papa's cruel verdict?'

The poor priest knew not what to answer. The Prince and Princess were still in the room, though hidden from Lavinia's view, and he feared to injure her cause by uttering an imprudent word which might show them how deeply he sympathised with her. So he lowered his eyes, and waited in silence.

'Don Antonio,' pleaded Lavinia, 'for the love of our Blessed Lady, I beseech you to tell me that Uberto loves me just the same as ever! What did he say to you of me and of our love? Do you think I care for all these considerations of papa's about his fortune? Or about the promise of marriage papa has withdrawn? Oh, please, Don Antonio, tell me that he is faithful to me, and come what may, tell him to believe in my love, for I will die rather than give it up!'

The Princess had heard enough. She thought it was time to relieve Don Antonio of his embarrassing position, and put an end to Lavinia's wild questions and requests.

She stepped forward from the dark corner behind the sofa where she and the Prince had been listening, and showed herself. On seeing her mother Lavinia closed her lips firmly, and leaned back on her cushions, allowing her heavy aching lids to droop and hide her eyes.

'I hope you feel better, my child?'

'Grazie, mamma,' answered Lavinia faintly.

'Young girls are very subject to faints of this sort,' pursued the Princess, 'they are of no consequence, and in an hour or so, I am convinced, you will feel as well as ever, and be able to appear at dinner.'

She wished all present to understand that there was to be no further weeping nor love-sickness, that her daughter would be expected to resume her usual life and that the present scene had been the formal burial of the past.

'Perhaps you would like to take something, a little *consommé*, or a glass of wine?' she inquired, hoping to force Lavinia to say something more, and gather from the tone of her voice the real state of her mind.

'Nothing, thanks.'

There was a moment's silence.

'How do you feel now, my child?'

'Very well, thanks.'

'Do you wish to rest a while?'

'Yes, please.'

In her despondent attitude there was a mute appeal to them to be left in peace, and they felt the suggestive power of her will. She still looked too fearfully ill, with those great dark lines under her eyes and her marble-white cheeks and brow, to permit of any further reference to the past or future. Her parents moved towards the door, followed by Don Antonio.

'We wish you to understand,' said the Princess from the threshold, turning towards her and speaking in a voice unusually gentle, 'that whatever we have done, and intend to do, is solely in view of your future welfare.'

No answer came, nor did Lavinia seem to have heard what her mother said to her. The Princess waited a moment longer, then turned and left the room with the others.

When alone at last, Lavinia gave free vent to her despair. The sisters mingled their tears, and it would have been hard to tell at first sight which of the two girls had been so roughly awakened from her dream of a loving lifelong joy. Bianca wept over Lavinia's woe as many maidens weep over the imaginary troubles of their favourite heroines, putting themselves in their places, and thoroughly investing themselves with their sufferings. With this unexpected annihilation of Lavinia's golden vision, Bianca's fantastic impersonal love suddenly crumbled away and vanished, and she felt more desolate, more lonely than ever, since it was no longer possible to live her secret dream-life while following the different phases of Uberto's and Lavinia's attachment. Her sister's happiness was being wrecked by narrow-minded pride of station, and she dared not ask her to share in her own intangible nameless grief. All she could do was to openly bemoan Lavinia's shattered hopes, and inwardly to lament the complete destruction of her own beautiful mythical idol. Such grief as theirs was beyond the comprehension of those around them. In their dreary loneliness they wept until there were no more tears to weep, and then silently crept into their narrow beds in search of friendly darkness, solitude, and freedom.

Meanwhile Don Uberto Casale was taking things in a manner diametrically opposed to that submissiveness and resignation which would have seemed proper and righteous in the eyes of Lavinia's parents. He had thus far acknowledged no authority but his own purpose and pleasure; now both had been bent and disabled by a fatal chain of events which had followed each other in too rapid succession to give him time to justly estimate their weight, and allow him to arm himself and manfully fight against them. He found himself disarmed and vanquished before he had fully realised the import of

the blow dealt him, and he ground his teeth in his helplessness to defend what he believed to be his right, and in his utter impotence to revenge himself on the authors of his undoing.

For several days and during the greater part of the nights he walked about his rooms in sullen silence, refusing to see any one, scarcely touching food, living on the exalted excitement of his sorrow. Luckily for him the very excess of his rage brought about a beneficent physical reaction. He fell asleep at last from sheer nervous exhaustion, and awoke after a few hours of sound dreamless rest, his head and heart cooled, a new man, ready for action.

For he meant to marry Lavinia, whether her parents liked it or not, and he was now capable of calmly reasoning with himself as to his chances of success, and as to the best means to be employed for reaching his goal.

To be sure, had he lived in those good old days of which the Astalli so constantly evoked the memory, the tenor of his reflections would have been vastly different. His strong arm, his sword, and his horse would then have been his counsellors and main support, and he would have sought to win his bride by deeds of daring and reckless adventure. He might well have trusted for the rest to the power of his name and the strong alliances of his family. But Uberto was a man of his times, whose broad views of life and sound practical common sense had been gleaned from his studies of men in other countries much further advanced in civilisation than his own. To succeed, he meant to employ means quite other than those which would have been suggested to him had he, like the Astalli and other Romans of their stamp, had recourse to the advice and friendly counsel of cardinals, monsignori, prelates, and members of different religious orders.

He was young, daring, and full of ardour, and his

firmness of purpose and tenacity of will were strong enough to sustain his resolutions.

He said to himself that the world nowadays was full of self-made men, and if others had succeeded whom he knew to be inferior to himself in most respects, he had at least as good, if not a better chance of winning the battle, in his struggle for a fortune and a wife. His courage increased, however, instead of diminishing, as he weighed the difficulties and obstacles which he foresaw in the future.

One anxiety troubled his security. He dreaded the effect of that atavism which, as he believed, had completely crushed all spirit of initiative and open independence in the hearts of his compatriots. He dreaded to discover in himself some seed of that fatal inheritance to which he ascribed the passive languor he held to be the result of centuries of servitude, submission, and narrow-mindedness, based on so-called principles of religion. He was of those who believe that the churchmen who had governed Rome so long, had made use of their priestly privilege of position as a moral weapon wherewith to impose implicit submission in things temporal, punishing all who broke their civil laws with spiritual penalties, and thus entangling social and religious questions in a manner that rendered it almost impossible for the Romans to discriminate between them. He believed that this moral despotism had rotted the core and dried the sap of self-reliance, for ever incapacitating the race to think or act for themselves without ecclesiastical guidance. He distrusted himself, fearing lest the paramount influence of the universal law of atavism should tempt him to act as every one would expect him to do, —fold his hands in humble submission, and lay up treasures in Heaven by heroic resignation, while allowing his worldly chances of success to slip through his fingers.

He was bereft of the two beings he loved most on earth — his father and the woman he had chosen for his wife — but when the full weight of his loss fell upon his heart, Lavinia's sweet influence seemed to spread over him and shield him like an angel's wings, and he prayed for courage in himself and help from Heaven. He did not ask for patience to endure the evils that threatened to wreck his life, but for strength to overcome them. Nor did he expect miracles in his favour.

As soon as this new determination had taken root in his mind, he started upon an exploring expedition to learn what it would be possible for him to do.

His first step was to the family 'computisteria,' where, with his brother, the family lawyers, attorneys, and divers confidential functionaries of the household, he endeavoured to arrive at a clear understanding of his present financial condition. The mechanical hard work of going over the many papers, books, and law documents did him good, as it prevented him from brooding over his misfortunes, and obliged him to concentrate his thoughts upon positive facts. There was, besides, a certain zest in trying to make clear his own rights, and quietly doing his best to increase his portion of his father's unentailed property, with a view to making life easier for Lavinia hereafter.

When he had taken cognisance of the exact state of his affairs, and knew how much free capital he could dispose of, he launched himself on the financial sea which at that moment was beginning to flood the Roman world. His first move was to ascertain what was going on in the money market, and in what speculation it would be wisest for him to embark.

Rome was then in the full activity of a moral and material metamorphosis. It had become the capital of a new kingdom which meant to be great in the eyes of other great countries as soon as possible, and at any

price. The small capital of the Papal states, containing scarcely three hundred thousand inhabitants, was thought too mean and small for its great purpose, and it was to be built over, enlarged, and generally renewed according to modern ideas. The quaint old houses, with their Roman or Greek windows, arched or square, blending in hopeless confusion the poorest specimens of mediæval architecture, in the shady, crooked, dirty streets, so dear to the antiquarian and the Englishman, were found unworthy of the city's new destiny, and were mercilessly demolished. Tasteless dwellings, six and seven stories high, with flat, yellow, or pink fronts, now border the broad straight thoroughfares, where not a tree is allowed to grow to shade the bewildered old Roman workman as he tramps along in the torrid sun, sweating and swearing, through eight months of the year, bemoaning the disappearance of the cool little 'vicoli' where it would have been possible to avoid the scorching heat of the tropical noon, and the danger of being crushed by hideous, shapeless, comfortless omnibuses and tramways.

When this fever of renovation seized the Italians, money flowed in from all parts of the world, and fortunes were made with startling rapidity. Don Uberto Casale decided to swim with the stream, to cast in his lot with that of so many others, and make use of his natural accomplishments and his engineer's diploma in an attempt to win a fortune.

Strange as it may seem in a country where democracy is becoming so popular — where the sovereign himself is as nearly a democrat as he can be without exchanging his crown for a Phrygian cap — aristocratic names are still useful in the hands of those who know how to make capital out of them. Little trusting to this, however, Don Uberto's first move was towards his father's old friends and comrades, who had become the ruling men of the day, and amongst these he selected those most likely

to further his purposes. He knew that party feeling ran very high just then, that the chances were all in favour of the friends of the new government, and he believed that the ruling powers would push him forward all the more readily for the sake of his father's patriotic adventures and popularity. His days were passed in constant movement, feverish expectation, sometimes in buoyant hope, and now and then in sad disillusionment, which often checked him, but never daunted his courage.

When night came, and he sat alone in his sitting-room amidst his pictures, his weapons, and tapestries, and his books of all sorts, including the writings of most modern authors of all countries except his own, then at last he dismissed the harassing preoccupations of the day, and gave himself in thought to the mingled joy and sorrow of his love.

CHAPTER XI

It was some time before these facts concerning Don Uberto Casale became known to the Romans belonging to the Black party. They still held themselves so far aloof from the Liberals that they knew little of what was going on in the political or financial spheres of the city.

Some few habitués of Casa Astalli had been informed of Don Uberto Casale's present pursuits, and secretly discussed them amongst themselves, but they stood too much in awe of the Princess to broach the subject in her presence. As time went on, however, the less timid friends and the broader-minded relations of the two families began to hint aloud that Don Uberto might find a remedy in his own labour for the consequences of his father's omission to make a will; and even in Princess Astalli's presence they dared to add sundry favourable comments regarding his manliness in thus going seriously to work, and setting an example to the idle young Romans, who had thus far feared to risk their dignity by working to make money. The case of a nobleman going into business was at that time almost unprecedented. Bankers there were, but even these were barely tolerated in society when they had made a fortune large enough to cover its own beginnings. But as for poor noblemen or the second sons of the great families becoming engineers, architects, lawyers, doctors, professors, men of letters or men of learning, in short, doing anything beyond joining the Noble Guards or becoming priests, that was a degradation not to be borne. They

believed it more respectable to live quietly on the sixty or a hundred scudi a month which the estate was obliged to pay to them during their lifetime than to work to make a living for themselves. The sudden opening of new financial horizons to the rising generation was distasteful to the Prince and Princess Astalli, like all things modern, and only seemed to confirm them in their opinion that for men of such principles there was no room in the old aristocratic Rome. They learned with horror that Uberto had embarked his entire fortune in his new career, to be multiplied or else engulfed with himself in the great ocean of human probabilities; and the Prince had been heard to say that even were his fortune to become as conspicuous as that of his brother, he would never hear of a marriage with a man of business. Their Roman friends knew well that what the Astalli said they meant, and poor Uberto, in pursuing what he thought must be the road to future success and happiness, had with his own hands crushed his last chance. There was also another reason of a political character, the importance of which rivalled the first in weight and gravity. The Astalli, like the greater portion of the Romans who had remained faithful to the Papal cause, believed that the present state of things was precarious, that the restoration of the temporal power by some foreign friendly nation might be expected at any moment, and that when this great event had taken place the dearly-loved old town would become again the 'Rome of the Romans,' who would enjoy the infinite bliss of seeing all the gorgeous paraphernalia of a modern capital drop away as if by magic, like Cinderella's fine clothes, to make room for the dignified antiquated customs and habits they had been so loth to part with. It was imprudent, therefore, humanly speaking, apart from the religious faith in Divine help, to believe in such a mad Utopia as a stable Italian government in the city of the Popes.

And when the desired return to a former state was accomplished, men might say good-bye to all the fond dreams and speculations in which so many millions were being swallowed up.

But political reasonings such as these were simply idle talk to while away the long summer evenings. The true obstacle, never to be overcome, lay in the fact that a daughter of the great Astalli house could not be allowed to lower herself to the point of marrying a man of business. Bah! their aristocratic stomachs were turned inside out and upside down at the very thought of it!

Don Uberto Casale's determination to see Donna Lavinia and speak to her remained as firm and unchanged as on the day when it had served him as a threat in his altercation with her parents. He meant to learn from her own lips if she would be faithful to him, to bide his time and allow no outward pressure to move her from her plighted faith. He longed to see her once again, to look into those deep true eyes, and gather new strength therein to go on fighting for her. Sometimes an evil spirit whispered doubts as to her constancy, and he suffered intensely, even while striving to drive all doubt away. What means would not be employed to obliterate even the memory of her lover from her heart! She would perhaps be brought by them to such weariness and despair that she would cease to resist, and marry the first man proposed to her as a suitable husband. Perhaps they were already searching for some Neapolitan prince, or Tuscan landowner, or even for a provincial cousin of one of her brothers-in-law. When these thoughts assailed him, he would walk the floor in an agony of fear for hours together. Then his faith in her faith would return, purer and more transparent than ever, as if refined by the ordeal, and he would smile to himself and feel ashamed of having doubted for one moment of her constancy or the strength of her character.

He remembered with grim satisfaction their many long conversations, when he had made a point of instilling into her broad and ever-ready mind new and liberal ideas about the great problems of life so dear to him; teaching her to reason for herself and not to accept blindfold the stereotyped maxims of others, and to be magnanimous in her judgments, forbearing and lenient to all. His socialistic theories of the future delighted her. She was so profoundly and intelligently religious that she appreciated at once the progress which the solving of the great social questions must bring about in favour of the suffering human majority. She had, as it were, reconciled in Uberto's mind science with religion by the divine harmony of her own beautiful soul.

Her simple, complete goodness, her horror of the very shadow of wrong, because it was wrong, her self-abnegation and truthfulness had often made him tell her with a tender smile that God must indeed exist, if the obedience to His laws and the faithful fulfilment of His precepts could make a woman as sublimely good and beautiful as she.

Now he feared her self-sacrificing submissiveness, her blind obedience to her parents' will. He longed to open her eyes to the sacred right which was hers — before God and man — the right of clinging to him who had received her plighted word. He wanted her to know that he had not accepted his dismissal as final, and that he meant to overcome the difficulties he encountered, however great they might seem. But to do this he needed her tacit connivance. It was necessary that she should know how much he counted on her fidelity, and that while seeming to submit to her mother's commands she should firmly refuse to marry any other man they might think fit to present to her as a suitor.

The greatest difficulty lay in the impossibility of communicating with her either by letter or through a third

person. For days and days he tortured his brain in his efforts to conceive some feasible plan which might bring him and Lavinia together. But he found none. The easy-going free customs of our century had barely begun to penetrate within the thick walls of the old palace on the Tiber. And yet it would be an exaggeration not to admit that even there, certain imperceptible changes had taken place, and time had gradually mitigated the fearful austerities of a century or more ago. After all it was a great concession to modern ideas to allow the wives and daughters to walk the streets of the city, unattended by footmen in full livery; to do their shopping themselves; and on some very rare occasion to try on a gown at the dressmaker's. In the olden times the apartment of the female members of the family — who had very little to do with their parents and passed most of their time with the maids and laundry-women — could only be reached by passing through the private rooms of the mother or mistress of the house. This strange arrangement allowed her to inspect with vigilant eyes every parcel or paper intended for them. No communication was allowed between the maids and the menservants, and their meals were passed to them through the revolving cupboard, exactly resembling those in the old convents, and which was placed in a square opening cut in the thickness of the wall between the kitchen and the laundry, and when not needed was closed by a wooden shutter with a lock, the key of which was in the mistress's keeping. These 'ruote' have long since disappeared from the old palaces, as well as the memory of them. One only is known to have been left in its place as a curiosity, in the beautiful old Palazzo Sacchetti.

Though this very simple and rigorous manner of guarding feminine virtue has become a legend of the past, it would have been rash folly in Casale to suppose that he could manage to send a letter to Donna Lavinia which

would not first pass through the hands of her mother. He mentally reviewed all the servants one by one, only to conclude that, like most old and faithful domestics, they resembled their masters in their ways of thinking and acting.

To be sure, there was Angelo the gardener, would he prove different from the others? Donna Lavinia had often spoken to Uberto of the old man's devotion to the sisters, when they were little things toddling about amidst his pots and buckets on the terrace, of the wonderful, almost incredible anecdotes he used to tell them of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, whom he had seen, when a mere chip of humanity, working on the terrace with his own father, and these tales she had repeated to Uberto, half-seriously, half-laughingly, to explain the origin of many curious customs and ideas of the present Astalli generation. Uberto had no reason to suppose that the gardener would differ in point of opinion from the other servants and dependants of the Astalli family; he was sufficiently familiar with Romans of Angelo's caste to know that it would be hard indeed to persuade him that the act of carrying a letter to Donna Lavinia was not in itself a dishonourable or despicable action. He well knew that to those of his class, no matter how upright and pure the intentions of the writer might be, it was always considered a shameful thing to serve as an intermediary. Nevertheless, he decided to make the attempt at any price. So he wrote a letter to Lavinia, put it into his pocket, and sallied forth one morning in search of his unsuspecting messenger. The first thing to be done was to study his habits. He remembered with mingled joy and pain that Lavinia had told him how she and Bianca used to jump out of their beds at early dawn in the soft spring mornings and hurry to their gardening before the sun rose, to breathe the sweet perfumed breath of the flowers in full bloom,

as they opened their petals to welcome the sunshine. No matter how early they strove to be there, Angelo, she had said, was always before them.

For several days Casale stationed himself in the immediate vicinity of the Palazzo Astalli before dawn. He discovered that Angelo lived in a dark narrow street in Trastevere, just beyond the Porte Sisto; that some two hours before sunrise he invariably crossed the old bridge at a slow measured pace, smoking his first pipe, on his way to the narrow Vicolo degli Astalli, which ran along the southern side of the palace, and reached the water's edge by a steep descent; then he paused and unlocked the little green door with a key a Cyclops might have forged; lastly he mounted the winding stairs which led to his flowery kingdom above and disappeared.

Having ascertained these facts, Casale decided to wait for the old man before his own door. It was a hazy bluish summer morning, foretelling great heat, when the sun should have drunk up the little moisture that floated in the atmosphere, and objects at a distance looked weird and distorted. Soon Angelo issued from his dingy home and at his regular pace began to make his way down the little street. Never in all these forty years had he seen a gentleman abroad in Trastevere at that early hour — and his surprise was increased when Uberto immediately came up to him at the door of his house. All Trasteverini are suspicious by nature, and Angelo's first impulse was to feel for his knife in his pocket and then to walk slowly forwards.

He saw at once that it was not one of the people by his walk, his size, and his peculiar clothing — for Uberto wore his white rowing flannels, with a serge jacket carelessly thrown over his shoulders — but the old man's sight was dimmed by age, and the light was too uncertain to allow him to recognise the features. Casale was slightly ashamed of himself — what he was doing seemed absolutely absurd and schoolboy-like.

He smiled uncomfortably as he thought how he should feel if any of his friends caught him trying to corrupt Prince Astalli's gardener. But he consoled himself with the reflection that the little god who was represented blindfold had an especial predilection for bold lovers, whether their actions were boyish or not.

'Buon giorno, Angelo,' he said, slightly raising his voice as he moved towards the gardener, who had not yet recognised him. 'Are you already on your way to the Palazzo Astalli?'

Angelo stared spellbound, his great toothless mouth wide open, his rugged, hard, sunburnt face a picture of amazement, for he had at last identified his early visitor, and he began at once to wonder maliciously what mischief this handsome young fellow was about in Trastevere at three o'clock in the morning.

'Eccellenza sì,' answered Angelo, taking off his hat and holding it in his hands until Casale, as was customary, motioned to him to put it on again.

'Yes,' he pursued, in answer to Casale's silly question, 'I am going to attend to my business. If I did not give my plants their morning draught, they would be withered or dead before sunset.'

He drawled out his words, watching Don Uberto the while, with that side-long cunning expression common to the lower classes when trying to fathom the meanings and purposes of their masters. But while answering one question his eyes seemed to be asking another. 'Whose business are *you* about in this quarter of the town, I wonder, my fine young gentleman?'

Casale soon satisfied his curiosity.

'When the day's heat has set in and all your shrubs have had their fill of cooling drink, then it will be your turn to be thirsty, eh, Angelo?'

'Eccellenza sì,' he answered insinuatingly; 'your Excellency says well!'

'Do you know, Angelo,' said Uberto, thinking it was time to plunge, 'if you would only do me a little service — oh! nothing of any importance — just the simplest, easiest thing in the world — you shall have a fiasco of Vallinfreda Muscat, big enough for you and your wife to swim in?'

Angelo was beginning to understand whose business the handsome young fellow was about in Trastevere, but he prudently remained silent and waited for him to show his cards.

'I said I wanted you to do me a slight service,' pursued Casale after a moment's hesitation. 'I should have said that I wished you to do me a kindness, for which I would be very grateful, Angelo. You shall have a hundred francs for your trouble, besides the largest fiasco of wine to be had in Rome. Will you take this letter to my fidanzata, Donna Lavinia?'

'Signorino mio!' exclaimed the old gardener, drawing back and suddenly collapsing and trembling in every limb. 'Do not ask such a thing of me! It breaks my heart to see our young lady weep all day — I would give my life to see her dry her tears — but I cannot do what you ask of me! Great God! what would my master the Prince say if he only knew that I listened to such a proposition?' and again he began to tremble even more violently. 'It is impossible — impossible — impossible,' he repeated. Don Uberto gave him time to recover from his fright.

'I see I was mistaken in believing that you love your young mistress,' he said reproachfully.

'Oh, as for that, I defy anybody to assert that I do not worship the ground my young lady walks upon!' answered Angelo with warmth.

'Do you believe that there is no one else in the world who would die for her, my good old Angelo?'

The aged man glanced at the tall youth who smiled so

sadly as he looked down into his eyes. How god-like he seemed, and manly too! 'No wonder the Signorina was weeping her eyes out to have lost such a lover,' he thought.

'Eccellenza!' he said, 'I saw our Signorina the day she was born, when she was taken to the chapel to be baptized. She was a little bundle of laces under the red satin and gold baptismal cloak in which all the Astalli have been carried to the font for over three hundred years. I was there and heard her cry when Don Antonio put the pinch of salt in her little red mouth. And how she did scream — bless her heart! and that is why she is such an angel now, Eccellenza, for we Trasteverini have a saying that when a baby that is being baptized cries like that, it is a sign the Sacrament of Baptism has chased out the devil for ever afterwards. I have seen her every day for seventeen years in my garden, and she has always been the fairest of all my flowers!'

Angelo's heart was softening at the memory of the comely girl's childhood, and Casale, thinking he had found his adversary's weak point, made another thrust.

'Had Donna Lavinia asked this same favour of you, could you have been so hard-hearted and unfeeling as to refuse her?'

'Were Donna Lavinia to ask me to throw myself into the river there,' he answered with enthusiastic conviction, 'I would do it to please her, but I would also drown myself rather than betray my master. For over half a century I have eaten his bread, could I to-day commit a *tradimento* against him?' Angelo made the sign of the cross, and sadly shaking his head muttered a jaculatory prayer against temptation.

'Fiasco!' murmured Casale to himself with an oath, sadly at variance with the good old man's inward devotions. 'Nothing is to be got out of him, so I had better not push matters any further, at least for the present.'

'Addio, Angelo,' he continued aloud, turning on his heel, 'I am off in search of another friend to help me. You had better think over the matter when I am gone, and persuade yourself that the best thing you can do for your beautiful mistress is to try and save her heart from breaking.'

Angelo took off his hat and only put it on again when Don Uberto Casale was almost out of sight. Then he turned and pursued his accustomed way towards the Palazzo Astalli.

Casale walked nervously about in the confused little streets for some moments, and suddenly found himself in the hilly piazza which led up to the bridge. There before him he caught sight of Angelo's square figure just disappearing.

'Confound him!' he said, savagely biting his mustache, 'the devil has put his tail into my affairs lately.'

Just when he needed a corruptible menial to serve the most honest of purposes, he had hit upon one of a type he believed to be wholly extinct. When Angelo died his bones would deserve a glass case in the Prehistoric Museum amongst the antediluvian fossils! In his past experience he had only met with faithless servants, eager to render all sorts of services, provided they were well paid for them.

He was in a ferocious humour, and grumbled savagely to himself as he made for his own apartment, where he locked himself in and began to concoct new plans, while brooding over his misadventure and signal failure. Towards evening his sevant knocked and informed him through the closed door that Don Antonio Caprari, the chaplain of the most excellent Casa Astalli, asked to be received at once, as he came on very important business.

'What new misfortune awaits me, I wonder?' thought Uberto, as he turned the key and opened the door.

CHAPTER XII

In breaking off Donna Lavinia's engagement, her parents had done what they firmly believed to be their duty. But it was not without a wrench that they saw the enchanting dream of riches and unhoped-for worldly advantages suddenly vanish when almost within their daughter's grasp. The attraction had been there. In the wealth and position they regretted to-day, lay the very reasons which had made this marriage seem sufficiently advantageous to outweigh the taunts of friends and enemies, the universal hue and cry raised by their own party, their inexpressible annoyance at having anything to do with people professing such principles as did the deceased Marchese Casale and his son, and their repugnance for the future friends and associates of the newly-married couple. The grief and bitter disappointment of the two most concerned in the matter had no weight in the balance, nor had ever had any. And in this they were perfectly consistent. They had desired the marriage because Don Uberto Casale at that moment was considered one of the best matches in Rome. He was not only a noble and nearly connected with all the great Roman families, but had also been rich enough to marry a girl with a very small fortune; and such a happy coincidence was so rare in Rome that they had been deeply grateful to Providence for their unexpected good luck. But matters were changed now. Uberto was poor and had lost caste by his connection with business. The Astalli found that the loss must outweigh the profit. The marriage was out of the question, and they forthwith

declared that the past must be wiped out and the *statu quo ante* restored without delay.

They were sorry in their own fashion to see Lavinia looking pale and careworn. They realised her grief from an objective point of view, but it was not their fault if they could not realise its depth. We are all at bottom what Mother Nature makes us, and as yet man has not fathomed her secrets. Education, religion, and philosophy may work many and strange miracles, but none of the three can warm a cold heart nor make of a fool a wise man.

The Prince and Princess Astalli believed that they had proceeded with perfect propriety in this rupture — a matter of business after all — and if Lavinia had fainted and showed undue feeling in the matter, she was to be treated as a mere child suddenly deprived of a plaything. She would outlive her sorrow, and in due time forget all about it, as most little girls did.

The best way to further this result was never to refer to the past, to avoid all allusions to people and things which might form a link with that lost happiness, and above all to extinguish surely and promptly every ray of hope which might still be lingering in the young girl's breast.

Since Don Uberto's exclusion from the family circle, Donna Bianca's wardrobe had been partially renewed; she had been placed on the same footing as her sister, and she dined regularly at her mother's table.

These formal gatherings at fixed hours were torturing to Lavinia's shaken nerves. Silent and absent, she never showed the slightest interest in the conversations that went on around her, and when the time came for the young girls to retire, she was the first to give the signal.

The Prince and Princess Astalli watched her closely, hoping each day to discover some symptoms of mending. When she left the table each one knew how many

mouthfuls of food she had swallowed. When her appetite was better at dinner than it had been at luncheon, her mother's spirits rose at once, and she already began to augur that the soul was healing and love decreasing. But the Prince would sigh and look despondent.

One of the greatest drawbacks to Lavinia's prompt recovery, they thought, was Bianca's incessant and untiring sympathy. It was sufficient to watch her an hour to appreciate the share she took in Lavinia's sorrow. She, too, often appeared with tear-stained eyes, and not heeding what was going on about her, sat silently looking at her sister. The Princess writhed under the consciousness of her own impotence to put a stop to this morbid community of ideas.

She lost all patience at last; her words became sharp and cutting, and her manner more repellent than ever.

One day, after luncheon, when the girls had seemed more crestfallen and taciturn than usual, the Princess, instead of establishing herself in a comfortable arm-chair for her afternoon siesta, as was her habit, walked across the cool darkened room and beckoned to Mademoiselle Gilberte to follow her, as she stepped out upon the terrace.

The weather had become extremely warm, and the air almost suffocating at that mid-day hour, under the brown awning within the heavy curtains which enclosed the terrace. They both sat down in the wicker garden-chairs, and the Princess fanned herself as she began to speak.

'Neither of the girls has eaten a mouthful of food to-day. What has been going on in the study, Mademoiselle? More tears, more sighs, more sobs and another sleepless night?' The Princess asked the question savagely.

'Nothing extraordinary has occurred, Madame. Lavinia has been suffering more intensely since yesterday because to-day was to have been her wedding-day.'

The Princess looked a little abashed at this. She had forgotten that Uberto had insisted on the marriage being celebrated on the 12th of June, because it was Lavinia's birthday. She had even tried to oppose this, inasmuch as it was a modern foreign fashion to commemorate birthdays in any way, and not approved of in Casa Astalli. They secretly nurtured a suspicion that this mania for solemnising birthdays, instead of the feasts of the saints by their namesakes, was of anti-Catholic origin and intended as a slight to the heavenly patrons.

'Mademoiselle,' said the Princess in her dull cold voice, 'it is time to put a stop to this morbid sentimentality. What are you yourself doing to bring Lavinia to a more sensible way of thinking?'

'I can only command her outward actions, Madame la Princesse, her soul is beyond my reach,' answered Mademoiselle Gilberte.

'You can at least stop this mutual incitment to pine after the impossible, by preventing any further free exchange of ideas and feelings between them!' rejoined the Princess snappishly.

'Indeed I cannot,' observed Mademoiselle meekly. 'I never leave them alone during the day, because I know that you do not wish me to do so. Most of the time I am in their room with them, but that does not prevent their speaking freely to each other in ——'

'What do they say?' inquired the Princess with a little more animation.

'I could not tell you, Madame, because I make a point of not listening to their innocent friendly confidences.'

'You do not listen to what they say?' exclaimed the Princess in unutterable dismay. 'Why, what is the use of your being there if you do not?'

'I am not there as a spy,' said Mademoiselle Gilberte gently, but looking straight into the Princess's eyes. 'Were I to take to eavesdropping now, I should lose the

moral advantages of years of labour. Lavinia and Bianca speak freely to each other — and to me too, for that matter — because they trust me. Were I to trespass on the sacred ground of their intimacy they would cease to be free in my presence, in thought or word, and would respect me less.'

The Princess wondered as she listened to this unexpected profession of faith from her daughters' governess. Never, in all her life, had she heard one of them express a sentiment, or give free vent to an individual opinion before her, even when little children. She bitterly and jealously resented that a stranger should have superseded her, and gleaned all the sweet confidences of her children's childhood and girlhood. She mentally accused them of ingratitude, and utter lack of filial love.

'If you think it wise to prevent any further intercourse between the two sisters,' resumed Mademoiselle Gilberte after a pause, 'you must separate them. Leave one to me and take the other to your own apartment. I cannot silence them now, as I did when they were little children. But I will add, for my conscience' sake, that I believe you would be doing wrong, Madame, to deprive Lavinia of her only comfort at the moment when her heart seems to be breaking with grief.'

'Breaking with fiddlesticks!' exclaimed the Princess, only too happy to find an excuse for raising her voice. 'You too are growing soft and sentimental, Mademoiselle Gilberte, and it ill becomes your stern face and high cap. It is simply ridiculous to see you sit there and bemoan the sufferings of a love-sick girl! I do not know what to make of my household — the evil, the laxness, and the uncertain morals of these shameful times have found their way even into your schoolroom. I tell you,' she added with growing anger, 'that the very fact that an Astalli can love a man whom she knows she cannot marry, is a shame to our house, and a disgrace to

you, who have not proved capable of making parental obedience the foundation-stone of her education. I blush to think that I am the mother of a daughter at whom society will point its dirty finger and exclaim, "Look at Donna Lavinia degli Astalli, pining for love of a man she can never marry!" It is all your fault, Mademoiselle — you have yourself to blame for the shame and ridicule that cover our name.'

She hid her face in her hands, and for one brief moment seemed completely overcome by her humiliation.

'All this is very distressing, Madame, and I deplore it most sincerely,' answered Mademoiselle, generously disregarding the Princess's thrusts at herself. 'But I do not see any remedy at present. Lavinia's heart is engaged and there seems to be no cure for that sort of infirmity. I have heard say that the faculty of falling in love is the immediate effect of a peculiar growth of the muscles round the heart — that one may be born with it — just as one is born with a dreadful temper,' — here she smiled a little maliciously, — 'and another with an extraordinary talent for music because certain fibres of the brain are developed more than others.'

'One can conquer a bad temper, and one is not obliged to cultivate a musical genius,' observed the Princess. 'Lavinia has been led astray by Don Uberto's dreadful ideas, and become thoroughly corrupted — that is the truth of it all — and she has forgotten that we are the lawful masters of her fate, and that she must respect our will, as she does the will of God. You should at least make an attempt to speak to her on the subject, Mademoiselle, and try to force her to conquer her feelings.'

'She is too down-hearted even to listen to me,' observed Mademoiselle Gilberte, shaking her head.

'And you are too soft-hearted and blind to wish to redress her ideas!' quickly rejoined the Princess. 'I believe that you are all three in love with Don Uberto

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— and a pretty trio you make indeed — a rebellious nun, an old maid of sixty-five, and an unprincipled love-lorn girl of eighteen.'

Seeing that her thrusts had no effect on the ancient high-capped maiden, who sat looking at her with calm unconcern, she again changed her tactics.

'I have decided to request you to alter the daily routine of the young ladies' lives. Some radical modifications must be made as a last resource, and you will be so kind as to inform me if my new system is working satisfactorily.'

'Certainly, Madame,' acquiesced the governess.

'First of all you will make them read aloud every day some worldly sensational modern novel.' Mademoiselle Gilberte started and sat bolt upright in her chair. 'Not too immoral, however', pursued the Princess, 'Jules Verne for instance, though they tell me that he never speaks of God in any of his books. They must then study their German literature during two extra hours every day. This will be quite as agreeable as the reading of sensational novels, for they are very fond of foreign languages. No more music, if you please! I absolutely forbid it. Nothing could be more enervating to the soul or so utterly demoralising as that passionate sensuous stuff of Wagner's Lavinia was stupidly allowed to study with Casale, and now plays all day. There is no God in that music either. You must make them take long walks. Fatigue is such a good antidote to sleepless nights. Lavinia, no doubt, lies for hours dreaming with wide-awake eyes; this is dangerous and relaxing, and must be carefully attended to.'

'The weather is too hot to allow of long walks,' objected Mademoiselle Gilberte; 'you do not seem to appreciate how very weak and exhausted Lavinia is just now.'

'Then let them take long drives out in the Campagna,' said the Princess. 'When they are far beyond the gates

of the city they can get out and take a run in the green fields. This will occupy several hours of the day. They cannot well shed tears with their hats on! and they will return for dinner refreshed and more cheerful. I will give orders that my victoria with the little Hungarian bays be in the court every day at half-past four o'clock for you. Oh! à propos,' she said suddenly, as a new thought struck her, 'does Lavinia keep a journal? If so, I think it would be advisable for me to see it. One can direct a young heart so much better by knowing what is going on in it.'

Mademoiselle hesitated. The girls certainly kept their diaries, and she had encouraged them to do so, believing that it was not only a comfort to them, but useful, inasmuch as it taught them to analyse events, and form a just opinion of their own actions and feelings, as well as on those of others. They were not allowed to lock up anything, indeed there were no locks to the furniture in their apartment, but they trusted their governess so completely that every evening after writing, they handed over to her their precious little books, which she carefully hid in her own desk, which was privileged and had a key. And now she was coolly bidden to give them up to others to read and discuss, when she would not for all the treasures of the earth have opened one of them herself!

'Madame la Princesse, you entrusted me with the education of your daughters, and for a score of years and more you have honoured me with your confidence; I now make bold to request that you continue to do so, and prove it to me by allowing me to say quite frankly that, inasmuch as it is I who should form your children's characters, I beg your permission to study their hearts in the manner I think best.'

Mademoiselle Gilberte's thin pale lips closed very resolutely after her little speech, as if they held the diaries between them, and did not mean to give them up.

The Princess stood reproved, and thought it wise not to insist any further just then. She meant to have those diaries, however, even if she had to get at them in a rather undignified way without Mademoiselle Gilberte's knowledge. She sat still, with eyes almost closed, until the governess, supposing her to be dozing, rose quietly and re-entered the drawing-room.

The Princess was not asleep, however, but sat pondering over her strange discovery that Mademoiselle Gilberte had a heart hidden away somewhere in her flat bosom. It was really most appalling, and could only be accounted for on the ground of approaching dotage. She remembered how, fifteen years before, when the ladies suspected of 'Liberalism' could be counted on the fingers of one hand, she had not escaped suspicion because she had entrusted her children's education to a French governess instead of putting them into convents as others did. She began to ask herself uneasily if the filtration of modern ideas, which became daily more apparent in her family, could be attributed to this departure from the old rule, and she resolved to be more severe and unyielding than ever. And yet it was a curious fact that no human misery, physical suffering, or sinfulness came within the reach of this uncompromising mother without receiving consolation, pecuniary help, and material assistance. On fixed days — for all things should be done orderly and in proper time — she went regularly, like many Roman ladies, to the hospital of San Giovanni, to the women's ward, and choosing the filthiest and most God-forsaken of those wretched beings, sat beside her bed and held her hand, talking to her with infinite tact of what might interest and distract her mind, without ever attempting to give a lesson in morality, or to preach a sermon — a thing so odious to the poor when coming from the rich; and then with gentle patience combing the damp, uncleanly, tangled hair, and brushing it out

until the sad sufferer smiled her thanks, and dropped off into a sweet refreshing slumber. No menial service was too repulsive or disgusting for the Roman lady. She helped the sisters who had charge of the hospital to make up the beds, wash the feet of the invalids that had not seen soap or water since last holy Saturday, and when the clock struck half-past eleven she would wrap herself in her common large cloak, get into the old-fashioned brougham driven by an under-coachman in a felt hat and shabby coat, and drive home, there to array herself in Parisian miracles for her mid-day meal. No one could dream that for many hours of that same morning she had been performing acts of high Christian charity, which might not have been despised by the saints of the early Church. She believed that it was due to her rank to wear handsome clothes, but what few she had were well cared for and lasted for years; otherwise she stinted herself and economised in every possible way with her pocket-money to pay the expenses of the Kindergarten she had founded at Vallinfreda and entrusted to the French Sisters of Charity, where some fifty little children were taken care of, and received an abundant meal once a day.

The internal management of her own home was regulated by the highest moral standard. She sought to make others perfect according to her own criterion of perfection, and never yielded nor swayed an inch from the principles which she believed to be infallible. She reminded one somehow of Emerson's definition of the strange ways employed by the powers above: 'If Providence is resolved to achieve a result it overloads the tendency.'

Having meditated for a good half-hour, the Princess rose from her straw chair, and passing quickly under the shade of the arching trellis, went straight to the Prince's library. He sat near the French window dozing

over his Clerical newspaper, and dreamily opened his eyes on hearing footsteps on the black marble floor.

'Ugo,' said his wife, seating herself on one of the very uncomfortable high chairs near the wall, 'I have just had a serious conversation with Mademoiselle about Lavinia's morbid state of mind, and I have come to the conclusion that to overcome it we *must* act more energetically. She still wears her engagement ring, and though she has shown the good taste not to adorn her person with the jewels Uberto and his father constantly loaded her with — a foolish extravagance, I thought — still the very fact of daring to be seen with his ring is a sure proof that she continues to believe herself engaged to him. Now, all these jewels must be returned to Casale as soon as possible. On receiving them Casale cannot do otherwise than send back the ring Lavinia gave him; and when we have that in our hands we will use it as a means to prove to her that he has given her up; we will put an end to this uncertainty about the future, and bring her to submit to the decrees of Providence.'

'My dear, those jewels should have been returned immediately!' exclaimed the Prince, considerably shocked. 'If I forgot it, you should have remembered that it is a lack of delicacy to have retained them one hour after we had dismissed the giver.'

'Lavinia was in such a dreadful state just then,' answered the Princess, flushing and looking annoyed, 'that I found it impossible to broach the subject to her.'

'I hope you do not need my authority to do so now?' inquired the Prince, suddenly becoming cowardly, like the bravest of men, at the prospect of a scene with a member of the weaker sex.

'No — perhaps not,' she answered with hesitation, 'at least not at present. The fact is, I would have done this long ago had I known exactly how to manage it. I

would rather not speak to her on the subject myself. There is an expression in Lavinia's eyes now that tells me I might get an answer to which I would rather not be compelled to listen. She is sadly changed, ahime!' — the Princess sighed — 'she is no longer a submissive little child.'

'Why do you not entrust Bianca with this delicate mission?' inquired the Prince, brightening at the idea.

'Bravo! that is a happy thought!' cried his wife, rising to her feet hastily. 'I will find her, and do it at once.'

CHAPTER XIII

BIANCA listened to her mother's rather prolix exposition of what was expected of her without uttering a word. To each of the Princess's emphatic injunctions that she was to say this to Lavinia, and not to say that, she acquiesced with a slight nod of the head; and as soon as it was decently possible left her mother and returned to her sister.

'Darling Lavinia,' she said as she entered the study, closing the door after her, 'mamma bids me tell you that you are expected to make another sacrifice to the will of our parents!'

'What more do they expect of me!' cried Lavinia bitterly. She was seated near the window, and turned her head slightly to look at her sister as she spoke. 'Did they not take my all the day they parted me from Uberto? No other sacrifice could have any pain for me now!'

'They expect you to give up your engagement ring, and all the love-tokens you received from Uberto!' added Bianca.

'What!' exclaimed Lavinia fiercely, 'did they dare say I was to part with the ring Uberto placed upon my finger as a pledge of his love? Never, never will I do that!' She spoke passionately and walked the room while pressing her left hand, on which she wore the ring, to her bosom. 'It is all that is left to me of my lost happiness — it is my own, my very own — and unless Uberto comes himself to ask me for it, I will not give it up.'

'Mamma said that it was absolutely and imperatively necessary for the honour of our family that you should

return all the presents received from Uberto and his father, as soon as possible — and that it was unmaidenly and ill-becoming a lady of your birth not to have done so as soon as the engagement was broken off.'

'Do you not see through their little strategy?' cried Lavinia with scorn. 'They would like to send my ring to Uberto without a word of explanation, hoping to make him believe that I had wilfully forsaken him, and that I was the one to break the bond of faith that binds us to each other. But I will not be their fool! Not until he gives me my own ring back, as a sign that all is over between us, will I consent to part with his! Go, Bianca — go and say as much to our mother who sent you here!'

'Indeed I dare not!' cried Bianca in frightened tones, her frail little person shuddering at the thought of such an embassage.

Lavinia stopped short in her walk, and examined Bianca's face carefully. She noted with surprise for the first time her sister's wan, troubled, uncertain expression, as she leaned with her elbows on the high old chest of drawers, and let her cheeks rest between the palms of her hands, her eyes seeking Lavinia's with an almost agonised inquiry.

'You have kept back something you do not dare tell me, Bianca!' exclaimed Lavinia, springing towards her. 'I see it in your eyes — perhaps — perhaps it is Uberto who has asked for my ring, and you have not the courage to say he has returned mine. Speak out, child — for God's sake, speak out! Do you not see this suspense is more than death to me? Say that it is not true, that Uberto could not possibly have done such a thing!' She shook Bianca so violently by the wrists that the poor child groaned.

'Uberto has not changed towards you, Lavinia, I am quite sure — please let me go. Mamma said nothing at all about his having returned the ring you gave him — oh! please let me go ——'

'Forgive me, Sorellina,' sobbed Lavinia, relaxing her hold, and kissing Bianca's red wrists while her tears fell fast on the frail little hands. 'I was foolish to doubt his loyal love even for a moment. All this is the result of these agonising months of loneliness, without a word or a sign from him to bid me hope against hope, and go on believing. I will try to be calm now, dearest — do forgive me!'.

'Yes, darling, try and be calm,' urged Bianca, seating herself. She rubbed her moist and aching wrists with her handkerchief.

'Love such as ours cannot be changed by outward things,' said Lavinia thoughtfully, 'but clever enemies may bring about unforeseen misunderstandings, as fatal to happiness as treason, neglect, or forgetfulness. It is against them that I must fight, and all my strength lies in the faith and memory of Uberto's words as he placed this ring on my finger — "I swear to be true to thee, Lavinia mia, and nothing save death shall ever part me from thee," he said. And I solemnly promised that I would be true to him, and follow him to the ends of the earth, if he bade me. Such love as ours cannot end in a day! It rolls on, resistlessly, crushing everything in its way, and years cannot smooth the deep ruts it leaves behind it! How short a time ago it was that neither you nor I knew what love meant! Uberto was my teacher, as I have been yours, Sorellina — but it will take a lover like mine to make you fathom the infinite depths of happiness which love opens to the heart. I feel quite sure he loves me to-day just as much as he did that night when he took me in his strong arms, and kissed me with kisses sweeter than life itself. Even in my sorrow,' pursued Lavinia dreamily, her great sad eyes looking back on the past, 'there is a joy mixed with the tears, a feeling that I have gained something it is beyond human possibility to rob me of. It is a wealth, a depth, a

power in my own soul that was not there before I loved — and even to-day, in my hopeless despair, I could not wish that the past had not existed!'

'I had believed,' said Bianca, 'that such sublime enthusiasm was only to be found in the supernatural order of things, and was granted to the human soul only in its intimate association with God by the mystic ties of prayer and works of charity. How comes it that I find all these superhuman aspirations in a heart filled only with love for a man?'

'Because love comes straight to earth from God, Sorellina,' answered Lavinia. 'And no matter how unworthy the object of one's love may be — not in my case, Heaven knows — yet the act of loving is always sublimely beautiful and good in itself.'

'Is your love strong enough to last a lifetime, without a hope of ever seeing Uberto again?' inquired Bianca.

'To doubt the constancy of my love would be to doubt its depth!' exclaimed Lavinia. 'And yet in my own heart I find inexplicable inconsistencies which I cannot explain. Is it that nothing can ever be whole and complete in this life? And that what we search for in human passion can only be grasped when our mortal bodies no longer weigh down our souls? Is it that the portion of our love which is earthly must needs be subjected to the laws of nature, and that we are meant to learn by this that we should only lay up treasures in Heaven?'

'Ah, how true that is!' exclaimed Bianca, with a radiancy in her eyes that almost made her seem beautiful. 'When you speak so you fill my heart with courage and strength and infinite joy!'

'And to have to realise such sad truths fills mine with doubt and sorrow!' answered Lavinia. 'Since I last saw Uberto the days have been added into weeks and months, and I have heard nothing of him. I have lived through unutterable hours of misery in going over the

probabilities for or against my ever marrying him, and my heart has sometimes sunk so low as to waver in its trust, and to fear the worst possible things. Those were the times when my ring, the one and only real tangible thing left to me, was of itself sufficient to rekindle my whole faith in Uberto's promises, and save me from dying then and there of despair. My ring seems to speak to me of him. It drives away doubt and fear, and its deep-set ruby is like the burning fire of our love, which time cannot extinguish, nor even reach. When I go to bed at night I put my left hand under my cheek. I like to fancy that it has some supernatural power over my thoughts, to transport my soul beyond its prison bars to the free space where my love lives. I would that an unbroken communion of thought might strengthen our faith in each other, and that our hope in a brighter future might shine as steadily as the red light in my ruby, and direct our steps in love's path. It is my talisman — the only tangible thing out of the past which they wish to take from me to-day! They shall not have it!' she cried, again becoming passionate. 'I will not give it up! Go to mamma, Bianca! tell her I say she must cut off my very finger to get it ——'

'Oh, Lavinia, this means open rebellion!' pleaded Bianca, horrified.

'Yes! Let it be open rebellion!' cried Lavinia impetuously. 'I am tired of everlasting submission.'

'Must I really go back to mamma — who is waiting for your answer, you know — and say that you absolutely refuse to obey her orders? Beware, Lavinia! You must see all the gravity of such conduct. Remember that the family annals bear no record of anything so dreadful.'

In answer to Bianca's prudent expostulations, Lavinia sprang forward as if she had just taken a final resolution, and opened the drawer where in neat order lay the many

jewel-cases of various sizes, shapes, and colours given to her at different times by Uberto and his father.

'Take all these jewels to mamma,' she said, piling them together. 'They are worthless to me. She can do what she pleases with them; only say to her that as for my ring, I consider it the emblem of a sacred tie she has no right to rend, and I will not give it up.'

Bianca's timid, submissive, retiring nature shrank before the task that was imposed upon her by her resolute indignant sister. At the thought of the scene awaiting her in the library, though she was only the emissary of another's revolt, her heart grew faint in her breast, and she would have greatly preferred that Lavinia should speak for herself.

Had she, however, known how to analyse her intimate sensations, she would have been somewhat amazed and not a little shocked to discover that beside her fear there dwelt in some secret corner of her heart an odd sense of satisfaction that some one bolder and braver than herself did mean to resent the tyranny that oppressed her, marring her life by opposing her religious vocation, and which was now about to mar Lavinia's. But between impersonating her wrongs and griefs in those of another, and being the bearer of the subversive ultimatum of that other, there was all the difference in the world.

'Could you not word your message less haughtily?' she inquired uneasily, with a faint qualm of conscience at her own extraordinary and contradictory sentiments. 'May I not say that you ask her forgiveness for the pain you know your words will cause her, but that you feel in duty bound to keep your promise to Uberto, or something of the sort to sweeten the pill I shall have to make her swallow?'

'No. I have done her no wrong, and I ask for no forgiveness. It is best she should know that I have made up my mind, and I mean to abide by my decision. I

have had enough of the family hypocrisy and love of superficial compromise!'

Lavinia's eyes had grown several shades darker. Her cheeks were flushed, and her full red lips curled scornfully in a smile which lacked its usual sweetness.

'What has become of that fearless zeal, that holy reckless ardour that threatened to consume you on your exit from the Convent four months ago?' she inquired tauntingly of her trembling little twin sister. 'You frightened me almost out of my wits then by insisting that you would face the storm, and boldly declare to our parents that you intended never to return again to the Barberine.'

'We have exchanged our parts, that is all,' answered Bianca sadly. 'Then it was you who trembled and shrank from the encounter, and now it is I! Passion sustained me then, as it does you to-day. Alas! alas! Lavinia, that my zeal for so sacred a cause should have waxed cold by contact with your earthly passion!'

'The cause of liberty — liberty of conscience, of course,' added Lavinia quickly with a pale smile, seeing Bianca's look of consternation — 'is always sacred!'

'Oh, Lavinia! if mamma only heard you talking about Liberty, and all those other dreadful things!'

Don Antonio had been chosen in the meantime as minister plenipotentiary to Don Uberto Casale, and was at once summoned to attend his Excellency the Prince in the library, where he now stood, with pinched lips and downcast eyes, listening to the many instructions it was thought wise to impart to him in order to render easier and more satisfactory the delicate mission he was expected to undertake.

On the centre table lay all the legal papers that had been exchanged between the two families — the marriage contract, the settlements made by Don Uberto, the arrangements for the payment of Donna Lavinia's dowry, and many other detailed business particulars, all drawn

up on stamped paper and ready for the day of the formal signing of the marriage contract, which was to have taken place on the Marchese Casale's return from Bologna. The silver box containing the deed renouncing the Vallinfreda claim, presented to Donna Lavinia on the day of betrothal, was also there. The old priest listened patiently to all their arguments and the plausible reasons the Prince and Princess brought forward to palliate their mode of procedure.

Great indeed was their surprise when the old priest, after listening with undisguised disapproval to their long-winded argumentation, dared to raise a difficulty, more apparent at first in the tone of his voice than in his words.

'Your Excellencies do me a great honour in intrusting to my very humble diplomatic abilities the conclusion of this delicate affair. I will return these papers' — he pointed to the table — 'and the jewels to Don Uberto Casale, and request him to give me the engagement ring he received from Donna Lavinia. Your Excellencies however seem to believe that when these very secondary details of form have been duly settled, the matter will be ended, and that henceforth all things will proceed according to your desires! But what arguments, pray, can I oppose to those of Don Uberto Casale should he, by chance, refuse flatly to renounce his rights to the hand of Donna Lavinia? For neither of you can ignore, of course, that a formal promise exchanged between free, marriageable persons, constitutes a canonical right in the eyes of the Church.'

'What have your canonical laws to do with Lavinia's engagement?' exclaimed the Princess disdainfully. 'How can you be so guileless as to regale us with a homily full of moral animadversions, when you know that one thing alone preoccupies us just now — the annihilation of all material bonds which still seem to hold these silly young people together?'

'But the moral bonds, Eccellenza! what about the moral bonds which the Church ——'

'Pshaw! Don Antonio!' cried the Princess in a scandalised and contemptuous tone, 'what imaginary moral bonds can bind a daughter of mine when I decide to break them? When you have succeeded in accomplishing the mission intrusted to you, leave the rest to me! I will soon get the better of Lavinia's obstinate perversity and bring her to her proper senses.'

The old priest smiled a little. He believed a great disappointment was in store for the confident mother. In his dignified way he had tried to make them understand that the principal impediment to the accomplishment of their will, was the resolute opposition of the two parties most concerned; but this was of all things the one that interested and troubled them least, and weighed least in the moral balance.

They were both shocked and grieved that the unassuming old priest should thus awkwardly bring forward, as a matter of importance, a perfectly idle and silly hypothesis.

No one broke the protracted silence that followed. Don Antonio, having long since learned the hard lesson of passive obedience, kept his other doubts to himself, while the Princess began to distrust her perspicacity in the choice of the ambassador.

Just then Bianca made her appearance, her arms full of boxes. She seemed to be very nervous and agitated. Her moral burden was heavier to bear than the treasures of precious stones which filled her arms. She who had never been able to confront the cold severe stare of her parents' eyes — who had let herself be locked up in a convent for a year rather than boldly assert her horror of it — now found herself the mouthpiece of Lavinia's rebellion, and the herald of her bold resistance.

When she saw Don Antonio standing there between

her parents her face brightened and her heart took new courage. She knew instinctively that in him she had an ally, and the painful task of racking her brain to find out what she should do or say, and how she should begin, ceased to preoccupy her. She determined to leave all to chance, and quietly began to set down the things she carried. The Princess rose to help her, a triumphant smile on her cold thin face.

'You see, Don Antonio, how very satisfactorily things proceed,' she said exultingly. 'This new triumph confirms me in my belief that unflinching severity is the only true medicine for the young.'

Before placing the boxes in symmetrical order on the table, the Princess opened each, and cast a glance at the contents. When the last one had been inspected she looked up quickly into Bianca's face.

'Uberto's engagement ring is not here!' she exclaimed in angry surprise.

The dreaded moment had come! The Princess and her two silent witnesses stood watching Bianca. She looked from the one to the other in helpless anguish, seeking some sort of moral support to carry her through the dreaded ordeal, but none came. She felt as if she were going to fall, the room swam round, she heard strange noises in her ears as she closed her eyes, and was just saved from sinking to the floor by Don Antonio's pushing a chair under her, and in a friendly comforting voice bidding her to be seated. The hallucination had scarcely lasted a second and vanished at the sound of the sympathetic familiar voice. When she opened her eyes again the blood which had rushed tumultuously to her brain had resumed its usual course, leaving her cheeks a few shades paler.

'Lavinia bade me tell you, mamma, that she is willing to part with these souvenirs, much as it grieves her, in obedience to your orders; but that she will not give up her engagement ring.'

She spoke slowly and distinctly, as if weighing her words, but there was a painful quiver in her weak voice. It was the boldest speech she had ever made to her parents, and she now rested her clasped hands on the table and waited. Her mother sprang forward, her face convulsed, her hands quivering, as she extended them in one of the passionate Italian gestures which so well express grief or anger when words are not forthcoming.

'She refuses to give up Uberto's ring! Do you hear, Ugo? She denies our authority and openly rebels against it. She is a wicked, perverse girl! I disown her — she is no child of mine!'

The Princess spoke in broken sentences, choked by her anger, wounded pride and genuine grief for the crime she honestly believed her child was committing.

The Prince fully sympathised with his wife for once, and her impassioned appeal to him in her sorrow stirred his anger against the hapless absent daughter. It was fortunate for her that she had chosen an expiatory victim in the person of her innocent little sister, for no one could tell, had she been present, what might have followed her declaration of independence had she made it herself.

'Lavinia could not have said such a thing,' said the Prince, taking hold of Bianca's arm; 'you have not expressed yourself properly.'

She shuddered; his touch reminded her of the many cold conscientious blows he had dealt her in her childhood. Her only answer was a slow shake of the head.

Don Antonio thought it time to come to the rescue; his sympathy for the little maiden prompted him to speak, and even if his words proved idle, they would at least give his noble masters time to collect themselves and save their dignity by controlling the rage that blinded them.

'Allow me to put a few questions to Donna Bianca,'

he said, looking at the Princess, who seemed the most overcome. 'Donna Lavinia doubtless desired you to respectfully request her parents to permit her to keep the ring, did she not?' he continued, addressing Bianca. 'Pray try and remember her precise words. I feel sure that nothing but a petition to this effect passed her lips, and that she even added that she would obey her parents' injunctions, should they think it wise not to grant her request.' He accentuated each word as if wishing to give Bianca a cue to her answer.

She caught his meaning, and was grateful for his conciliatory intentions, but Lavinia's words, 'hypocrisy and compromise,' returned to her mind. She alone knew how far Lavinia's thoughts and resolves had gone beyond either. A sudden flash of triumph shot out of her meek dove-like eyes as she realised that she was at last about to speak plain truths to Don Antonio in her parents' hearing. She moved towards him, so as not to face them.

'Don Antonio, my sister made no objection when I told her mamma wished to have all the jewels given to her by her betrothed and his father. She even got out the boxes herself and gave them to me; but as for the ring, she said that to get it mamma would have to cut off her finger ——'

'Bene, bene!' interrupted the Princess mockingly.

——'Because it was not an ordinary gift, but something very sacred,' continued Bianca, 'which bound her to Uberto whom she had solemnly promised to love for life. And she did not mean to part with it at any one's bidding save Uberto's, or when he should return the ring she gave him, as a sign that he wished to be freed from his promise.'

She gave a side glance at her mother to see the effect of her little speech, and was not less amazed than was Don Antonio when the Princess, in a pacified voice,

begged her to repeat Lavinia's last words. Bianca did so willingly, and even hazarded a few more of those subversive statements of Lavinia's which had caused such dismay in the schoolroom.

'You may tell your sister that her conduct is shameful, but that she will not have long to wait for her reward. Casale will return her ring, and sooner than she dreams of — now go!' And with an imperative wave of her hand she dismissed the young girl.

The maiden's last words had revealed three different possibilities to the elderly people who listened to them.

They left no doubt in Don Antonio's mind that by the action of time and imprudent opposition Lavinia's love was growing stronger and more unconquerable, as all true love does.

To the Princess it seemed certain that her daughter's mad infatuation for a man whom she could never lay eyes on again, must come to a rapid and violent termination at the sight of his ring.

The Prince was sure that he was the unhappy and much-to-be-pitied father of a reckless, unprincipled, immoral daughter, who no longer feared God, since she ceased to fear him.

'I see by your expression, Signor Abbate, that you believe I am going to have trouble before I succeed in tearing up this love by the roots!' observed the Princess contemptuously. 'But I know better. It will be done rapidly and thoroughly.'

'Does your Excellency really believe that?' inquired the priest curiously. 'My opinion is vastly different, as your Excellency justly observed. It is easier to light a fire than to put it out. I sincerely hope ——'

'No matter what you hope, Don Antonio,' put in the Princess petulantly. 'You had better go at once about your errand. Take the Prince's brougham, which is waiting in the court, and get a bag to put the boxes in

— they are too numerous to be stored in your pockets, large as we know them to be — and do not return here without Don Uberto Casale's ring. Remind him, should he object to consigning it to you, that no true gentleman has a right, under any pretext whatever, to keep an object given to him by a lady of Lavinia's birth when her parents formally request him to return it.'

'Eccellenza,' observed the priest in a grave voice, 'before starting on this very painful mission, I must again recall to your mind the extreme weight of a solemn promise of marriage, exchanged between two young persons of their own free will, in the eyes of our Holy Mother Church. Such an engagement is vastly more binding than any arrangements made between fathers who are anxious to see their children united in wedlock for worldly considerations or family interests. Before the Council of Trent our two lovers would have had every right to consider themselves legally bound for life, simply because they had exchanged their pledges. I mention this to prove to you the gravity of your action in this matter, and not because I approve of those times — I prefer the present — bad as they seem to your Excellencies.'

'If the Church thought wise to change that state of things, it is a sign that radical reforms were considered necessary,' said the Princess, 'and your very statement proves that I am following the more modern theories of the Church in my way of proceeding.'

'The Council of Trent,' resumed the priest, speaking slowly, in a grave voice, 'only added a ritual form to the sacrament of matrimony, and decreed that the parish priests were to administer it, without however entering into the intrinsic merits of the question whether the celebrant or the receptive parties were the true ministers of the sacrament. The best proof of the correctness of my assertion,' he continued more emphatically, seeing

a crisp incredulous sneer on the Princess's lips, 'lies in the fact that should the betrothed parties present themselves before the parish priest and say, "This is my wife, this is my husband" — even though the curate may know of the family difficulties, the violent opposition of the parents and the terrible consequences likely to ensue — if there really be no canonical impediments, he cannot withhold his blessing from them, nor refuse to register the marriage in the parish records. The Church disapproves strongly of such marriages; but all she can do to enforce obedience is to threaten them with spiritual punishment, inasmuch as she acknowledges such marriages *to be valid*, though irregular.'

The old priest was in the habit now and then of giving them little moral shocks like this, to prove to them that the Church, whose authority alone they admitted to be superior to their own, was infinitely more broad-minded and liberal than they were.

It was one of his pet theories that all men make their God according to their own image and likeness. The God of the Astalli was a strict observer of given rules — a sort of time-table — who spoke in dogmas at well-regulated hours of things spiritual and temporal, and who showed no mercy to those Italians who in the slightest degree differed in opinion from the Roman Papal party in general, and the most excellent Casa Astalli in particular.

The little Roman child — the most solemn and matter-of-fact of children — imagines the Almighty Father as an aged kind-featured man, with a flowing white beard and outstretched arms, over whose head hovers a white dove with widespread wings, as in sacred pictures, seated amidst clouds of liquid gold and royal amethyst, like one sees hanging over Saint Peter's when one looks westward from the Pincio at sunset. And when it thunders and the sky grows dark and lowering, the children believe that He has risen from His gorgeous throne, and

is tossing cannon-balls amongst the clouds for His divine pastime. The gloomy and revengeful man's vision of his God is that of a pitiless despot for ever sitting in judgment upon departing souls, and dealing out cruelly refined punishments more fearfully ingenious than those of the 'holy inquisition.'

Prince and Princess Astalli often laughed at the family chaplain's attempts to broaden their minds; and though he really never made much progress in the propagation of his views, he was at least allowed to express them freely. To-day, however, his liberal theological treatise appeared out of place and untimely to them and sundry truths it contained rankled uncomfortably in the Princess's heart.

'What absurd old song is this that you are treating us to, Signor Abbate?' she exclaimed. 'Do you expect me to believe for one moment that our dear Mother Church encourages children in open rebellion against their parents by facilitating the means of revolt? Were things as you state them to be, modern society would be swept to its destruction at a pace even faster than at present. I believe it is dissolving speedily enough as it is, without the aid of the Church! But enough of this. Your duty at present is to help me in my endeavours to prevent my child from making a miserable marriage; and you will take good care to use other arguments to bring Don Uberto to our way of thinking than the decrees of the Council of Trent!'

'Signora Principessa, my words and actions will have to be regulated according to those of Don Uberto, and not until I have spoken with him can I prognosticate the future.'

'There is no use in awaiting your colloquy with Casale to foretell the future in this instance!' exclaimed the Princess. 'Man is master of his own destiny at certain critical moments of his existence, when it is given him

to see fully and clearly for one brief instant the consequences of his actions.'

'The natural aim of man is to aspire to perfect happiness in this world. Were your theories true, Excellenza, we would all seek and find that happiness at the expense of our better calling. The bravest of Christians would forget to take up the cross and follow Christ if they really believed that at the expense of others' happiness they could fashion their present life entirely to their own satisfaction. We are but instruments moved by the hand of Providence, Princess. If a strong will could change the face of events — or the actions of other men — we should indeed be happy!'

'And how unhappy should I be if I did not believe that my will can and does rule certain events and certain people!' answered the Princess.

CHAPTER XIV

At the announcement of a visit from Prince Astalli's chaplain, an unreasoning instinctive thrill of joy shot through Don Uberto Casale's heart, followed immediately by uneasy speculations as to the nature of the old priest's errand. He could not doubt that if the Prince had decided to break the death-like silence observed towards him ever since his dismissal, it was for no slight matter; and a great cowardly dread of fresh suffering, of new wounds to be added to the old ones that still bled and caused him so much pain, seized his brave young heart. He turned pale and hesitated for a moment, doubting whether he should or should not bid the servant show in the kindly old man. But again he argued that whatever might be the purpose of this visit — for Uberto reasoned rightly that the chaplain could not possibly have come of his own free will — he, Uberto, must sooner or later learn the truth, and after all it might be less bitter if it came through Don Antonio than through strangers or persons belonging to the Astalli clan. Besides, Don Antonio could not well avoid speaking to him about Lavinia, and it was just possible that she knew of his coming, and had sent him a message, highly improbable as such a supposition was. The thought delighted him, whether it was absurd or not, and he went out to meet his visitor, more than impatient to hear what he had dreaded a moment before.

Don Antonio walked in, carrying a leathern bag in one hand and the large velvet box containing the silver coffer in the other.

Casale, after the first greetings were over, stood with folded arms watching the priest, and waiting for him to speak.

'I am sent by Prince Astalli,' said Don Antonio, his heart stirred by the eager anxious expression of Casale's eyes and wishing to put a stop to his suspense as quickly as possible, 'to return the presents his daughter received from you and your father — requiescat in pace — during your engagement.' He placed the bag and the velvet case on the table.

'What is the meaning of this?' inquired Casale in great surprise.

'It is not for me to teach you, Signore, that in your caste of society it is customary to return the pledges when, for some reason or other, the projected marriage becomes impossible. Prince Astalli did not wish to be found wanting in this respect, and bade me consign these jewels and papers to you and request you to ——'

'This is indeed something new to me,' interrupted Don Uberto, 'a custom I hear of for the first time in my life. I was too young, or perhaps too inexperienced, to have had occasion to notice it before. And it is rather sad that it should be my luck to learn it at my own expense! I do not like this fashion any better than most of those of your excellent patrons, Don Antonio! It must have been invented by some of the Astalli ancestors. What is given is given for ever, and there should be no taking back.'

'Yours is a generous appreciation,' observed the priest, 'but what will you! the world in which we live is full of these foolish unreasonable statutes of society, and we cannot exonerate ourselves from the strict observance of them, without making a code of our own, contrary to all the received ideas of the country and the caste in which we move.'

He was sounding, as it were, with his words to find a

safe anchorage in case Don Uberto Casale thought proper to raise a storm.

There followed a rather long silence. Casale was studying intently what advantage to further his own ends was to be got out of this man, his visit, the restitution of the presents — out of everything or anything that presented itself.

'So this is what the world calls "proceeding with all due propriety"?' he asked presently, for the sake of saying something.

'There is no doubt about it, Don Uberto!'

'And society's verdict is that the Signori Astalli have acted perfectly correctly in all this affair?' inquired Casale angrily.

The old priest remained silent, while the young man watched him, evidently enjoying his embarrassment.

'Pray give me your opinion on the subject,' he continued, 'that I may learn something more of the usages of Roman society — which is my own. You have already convinced me of my ignorance, and I would like to persuade you, Don Antonio, of my willingness to be taught more.'

Don Antonio did not like to be cornered in that way; his loyalty to his master who had intrusted a delicate mission to him forbade his siding with the enemy, but his conscience also forbade his telling a lie. So he tried to confine himself to generalities.

'You have learned by experience, Don Uberto, that great joys and greater sorrows follow each in rapid succession in this unstable world, and ——'

'I have learned,' broke out Uberto with temper, 'that there are people in it who in the name of their religion make a shameful use of their authority, and nothing more! Does it seem to you — a priest — that such conduct is becoming in persons professing to be model Christians? Is there an adequate reason, tell me, to justify the cruelty of parting me from Lavinia?'

His eyes flashed; the concentrated rage of months was finding vent at last.

To Don Antonio his words were the expression of his own thoughts when an hour earlier he stood facing the Princess and learning the part he was expected to play. Should Casale continue his fencing to try and draw him into a discussion, he would be obliged to sustain a contrary opinion, and this he disliked above all things. He foresaw that should this be the case, he would need all his rhetorical ability to get himself out of the difficulty. 'Lucky for me,' he mentally observed, 'that rhetoric is the art of persuading others without necessarily convincing oneself.'

'Why do you wish to draw me into a useless discussion, Signore?' he asked rather coldly. 'Even were we to come to an understanding between ourselves, it would not change the facts as they now stand. I have been bidden by their Excellencies to hand you these things' — he pointed to them — 'and to request you to be so kind as to return in exchange the ring Donna Lavinia gave you. To these two points I wish to limit my mission.'

'You had not mentioned this second object of your visit before!' exclaimed Casale, flushing angrily, and rising to walk the floor. 'I understand now,' he said to himself in a low tone; 'this is intended as a final liquidation, a legal annulling of the engagement. Is that true, Don Antonio?'

He turned suddenly and looked at the priest, who bowed. 'But as for the promises exchanged between Lavinia and myself — our deep affection for each other, our firm resolve not to break the one and the impossibility of overcoming the other, — of these serious impediments to their finally annulling the engagement — they take no thought! "Let their lives be blighted! Let their hopes be crushed! What do we care," they say,

"provided we save appearances?" and so they wilfully break their beautiful child's heart, and drive me to —— God knows where!'

Casale sat down before his desk and hid his face in his hands. He did not like the priest to see how utterly overcome he was by his emotion.

Don Antonio said not a word. On his guileless face there was an expression of satisfaction as well as of sympathy, and had not Uberto been so enwrapped in his own sorrow, he would soon have discovered what a poor diplomatist was the simple-minded priest. Every word awakened a sympathetic echo in his heart, and his respect for the unhappy man before him equalled his pity.

The representative of Casale's enemies wished he were judge, jury, and witnesses in the case, that he might condemn the Astalli to make full restitution of the real treasure Uberto had lost. He attempted, however, to turn the current of the younger man's thoughts.

'You will find the legal acts appertaining to the marriage contract in the silver box with the Vallinfreda deed, which Prince Astalli considers should be destroyed with the other papers.'

'Say to the Prince,' replied Casale haughtily, 'that not even the destruction of this legal act can abrogate the solemn promises exchanged that day between Donna Lavinia and myself. To annul a document of that importance it would be necessary to draw up another; and that this should have the weight of a legal transaction, Prince Astalli, the Marchese Casale, and myself should previously come to an understanding as to its contents, and seal and sign it in the presence of our several lawyers and witnesses. Neither of us would ever do this; take my word for it, Don Antonio! The word of one Casale is the word of honour of all the rest, and what has been done by one of us cannot be undone.'

'Well said!' broke out Don Antonio, forgetting his

part, his blue eyes twinkling from under his snowy eyebrows. But he immediately tried to robe himself in his fallen diplomatic mantle. 'I mean,' he added seriously, 'that I quite understand your feelings in the matter, and even approve of your decision, but I have no right to discuss it or express an opinion. My duty lies in the accomplishment of my very simple mission, and having done this I will ask your permission to retire. Here is the list of the different objects contained in the bag — I should be extremely grateful if you would kindly verify its contents and give me a receipt for them.'

And so saying he handed Don Uberto the paper the Princess Astalli had given him at the moment of his departure.

Casale took the envelope and without opening it threw it on the table, and choosing a sheet of paper out of the silver stand in front of him, he dipped his pen into the inkstand and began writing.

Don Antonio did not understand at first what he was doing.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, 'for interrupting you, but if I am not mistaken you are about to draw up a receipt for all the jewels you gave to Donna Lavinia?'

'Of course!' exclaimed Casale, continuing to write.

'Don Uberto, before you proceed any further I must tell you that something,' — Don Antonio hesitated and looked troubled, — 'that something is missing!'

'Something is missing!' the pen dropped from between Casale's fingers and he looked up in blank astonishment at the priest's countenance. What he read there must have been very eloquent, for he flushed suddenly and continued his attempt to decipher the signs he saw in the simple messenger's face, with increased attention and curiosity. Don Antonio smiled dubiously and shook his head, and Casale began to feel very happy with a new undefinable hope that he could not have put into words.

Was it possible that Lavinia had? — no! he did not really know what he hoped — and yet — he did hope many things — wild extravagant things — and the more he watched Don Antonio, the more convinced he became that Lavinia was, by some mute negative means, bidding him trust her, and have faith in her constancy.

'Your ring is not there!' said Don Antonio abruptly.

'Ah!'

Casale was too much overcome to speak.

'Much to the Princess's grief, Donna Lavinia refused to give it up unless you came yourself to ask her for it.'

'Ah!' again ejaculated Casale, his eyes sparkling, his forehead cleared in an instant of all the brooding clouds that had hung over it for months.

'Yes,' pursued the priest, watching the effect of his words. 'She even added something about having to cut off her finger to get it, unless you returned the ring she gave you.'

For years afterwards, indeed as long as he lived, Don Antonio never forgot the pleasure he experienced at that moment, in pouring the soothing balm upon the wretched young fellow's wounds. Perhaps he was not conducting the affair exactly as the Princess would have desired; he might have broken the good news to Casale in hard cruel words, copied on those generally used in Casa Astalli; but he consoled himself with the reflection that the truth must be told if he wished to prevent Don Uberto from signing a paper which it would have been positively dishonest of him to accept.

Casale had buried his face in his hands, and remained absorbed in his reflections for an unaccountable space of time. He was going over in his mind the different feelings and thoughts which had filled his nights and days since he had been parted from Lavinia. He had not really doubted her love, but those lonely hours passed in blank ignorance of how she had taken the blow, of what

she thought of him, of what she would have him do, of the extent to which she trusted him and meant to be true to her promises — all this had so shattered and bruised his heart and soul that at times he had scarcely known exactly what he hoped or feared.

Don Antonio's words had been like a ray of sunshine that penetrated into the most hidden regions of his heart, and even gilded the memory of past sorrows. While he thought of all these things, seated before his writing-table, his head sometimes buried in his hands and at others lifted high, his eyes wandering amidst the familiar objects in his room without seeing them, the priest stood quietly beside the open window, whence a soft summer breeze wafted into the hot room the pleasant coolness of the twilight. He could follow pretty closely the workings of Casale's mind in the changes that overcast his face. He understood that all his musings were not painful, for the cloud had been lifted and a smile was just visible now and then beneath his fair mustache.

It was rapidly becoming dark in the room, for twilight lasts but a móment in the south, and when Don Antonio realised that Casale showed no signs of coming down out of the clouds to the prosaic and immediate events which had placed them in each other's presence, he moved from the high marble step at the window and stood before the writing-table waiting to be spoken to. But Casale went on dreaming and looked vacantly at the dark figure before him.

'I hope you have made up your mind, Don Uberto, to give me the ring,' said the priest. 'By doing so you will have allowed me to conclude my mission in a satisfactory manner.'

'If you believe for one moment that I am going to give you my ring, my dear friend, you are sadly mistaken!' replied Uberto. 'You may tell the Prince that I will give it back when Donna Lavinia asks me to do so.

There! I have said all I mean to say on the subject; and you will save yourself trouble, and greatly oblige me, by desisting from further attempts to induce me to change my mind.'

He meant what he said, and Don Antonio concluded that any more discussion on the subject would be not only useless but ill-becoming on his part. The whole thing was a failure — there was no doubt about it — and he could not repress a sense of malicious satisfaction that the plot so carefully constructed by Princess Astalli to separate the lovers, should have served only as a means of strengthening their purpose by reassuring each of the other's unswerving love. This was ample compensation for his diplomatic deficiency, and for the prospect of a scene with her Excellency.

'I will inform the Prince of your refusal, Don Uberto, and now I may as well bid you buon-fresco,' he said, extending his hand.

'Buona sera, caro Don Antonio!' replied Casale, shaking hands cordially with the chaplain.

It was too dark for the two men to see each other's faces. Uberto stood by the table and watched his visitor until he was on the threshold.

'Do not go yet, Don Antonio, I have changed my mind,' he called out. 'I will give you the ring, but on one condition, that no one but yourself shall deliver it into Donna Lavinia's hands, and that you will bring me hers if she still persists in her decision to return it to me. Are you willing to give me your word that you will do this?'

Don Antonio was so taken by surprise at this sudden transformation of the scene that he had some difficulty in collecting his thoughts. What could this unexpected change mean? Did Uberto wish to put Lavinia's love to a test? Or did he believe she had ceased to care for him? He preferred the former supposition. After all,

it was perfectly natural that Uberto should wish to measure the depth of Lavinia's feelings for him in order to regulate his future line of conduct. He therefore willingly gave his word to Casale, and even added that, in case the Princess did not agree to it, he would bring back the little parcel without speaking of it to Lavinia. But he did not doubt of the Princess Astalli's consent when he had informed her of how nearly their plan had escaped being a failure, and how, by this slight concession, he had won the day.

Casale rang for lights, and began searching in the drawers of his writing-table for a box in which to put the ring; then suddenly remembering that the one belonging to it was in his dressing-room he went to fetch it, and returned just as the servant was placing a lamp on his table. He sat down again, and as he drew his ring from his little finger, Don Antonio asked to see it, admired the stone and handed it back to Don Uberto who placed it in its dainty little velvet case, and slipping this into a black-bordered envelope, proceeded to seal it carefully in several places with black sealing-wax, and finally handed it to Don Antonio, who was at last allowed to depart.

'Will it succeed, I wonder?' Uberto asked himself, when alone.

Half an hour later Princess Astalli was listening with lively interest to Don Antonio's account of his interview, his fears and hopes and final success. So great was her satisfaction that she even deigned to bestow a few words of praise on the able diplomatist, and made no objection to his fulfilling his promise to deliver the ring into Lavinia's hands. Casale had hesitated, and even tried to fight against the overwhelming fatality of his destiny — that was perfectly natural, she said — but he had at last been compelled to admit the folly of his pretensions, and accept their decision as final. She was quite sure

now that Lavinia would immediately recover her peace of mind, and, her pride helping — for she would be deeply wounded on learning of Uberto's faithlessness — she would forget the past even more promptly than her mother had thus far dared to hope. Don Antonio felt sadly inclined to agree with her, but just at present his principal preoccupation was the delivery of that ominous-looking parcel. He bemoaned the fate which always made him the messenger of evil tidings to the unhappy child, so dear to him, instead of allowing him to officiate in his sacred character at the altar, and bless her union with the man she loved.

Lavinia had just finished dressing for dinner, and was waiting for Bianca to go to the drawing-room when Don Antonio entered the study. She looked so lovely in her hazy, pale-blue muslin frock, with narrow Valenciennes insertions, made like a baby's gown, a bunch of red roses at her tiny waist; her face, though rather pale, bore such a sweet resigned look of melancholy, that Don Antonio's eyes filled with tears, and he wondered if it were not really criminal to wilfully destroy the placid harmony of one of God's most lovely creations.

A troubled look of anxiety came into her face when she saw him there at that unusual hour. With a cold tightening sensation about her heart she recalled all she had suffered on that other visit of his, and armed herself with courage and calm to receive the impending blow, whatever it might be.

'Do you remember saying to your mother this morning, Lavinia, that you would give her your ring when Don Uberto Casale returned his?'

'Well, what of that?' asked Lavinia anxiously, a horrible dread of the truth chilling her breast like the touch of a cold reptile.

'Here is Don Uberto's ring,' said Don Antonio slowly, as he handed her the little parcel.

She took it from his hands, and mechanically began examining the seals. She scarcely seemed to understand what it meant; perhaps she tried to put off the understanding.

Lavinia had believed that she had tasted of the last and most bitter dregs of human suffering, and that there remained nothing more at the bottom of the poisoned cup. It was through the heart, like all true women, that she was doomed to suffer most, and she did not know as yet that so long as it beats and throbs, new varieties of the cruel draught are for ever crushed and brewed for it to drink.

'It is not possible!' she cried at last, letting her arms drop, but still holding the parcel with both hands. 'Why should he return my ring? Can it be that he loves me no longer? — No! no! what am I saying!' she added with a forced laugh. 'Had you been sent to ask it of him, Don Antonio? Did he give it to you without a word of protest, or an assurance that he had not ceased to care for me? Tell me what he said!'

'Don Uberto at first refused staunchly to give me his ring,' replied the priest, 'but after a while he suddenly changed his mind — perhaps he saw the logic of my reasonings — and thought it his duty to submit to your father's injunctions.'

'How could he be so cruel when he knows I love him still! — oh, God! how unhappy I am ——'

Great tears streamed down her cheeks, she bit her lips, and her breast heaved convulsively in her effort to repress her sobs.

Her hands trembled so that she could scarcely break the black seals — it was like opening the coffin of his dead love, wherein were buried her past joys and dreams of future happiness.

Indignant thoughts, passionate recriminations surged up in her heart against him, and still her tears continued

to flow down her pale mournful cheeks to her hands, and upon the box while she opened it. But a sudden change came over her as she cast her eyes on its contents; she started, her tears and sobs ceased, and a beaming smile, almost immediately repressed, overspread her tear-stained face. She stood motionless before the amazed old priest for a moment, and then closing the cover of the box with a nervous grasp, she rushed from the room, leaving Don Antonio standing as if turned to stone in the middle of the study, his mouth wide open, his arms half raised in his boundless astonishment.

CHAPTER XV

Don Antonio came to his proper senses under the painful and humiliating impression that he had been made a fool of. No man likes to realise that he has unwittingly served as a tool in another man's hands, and no Italian ever liked to be a *porte-poulet*, as the French have it, even to serve his nearest and dearest friend. He winced as he thought it over, and was half inclined to be angry with Casale. But soon the absurdity of his position struck his sense of humour so forcibly that he burst out laughing, and his mirth disarmed his resentment.

'How cleverly the rascal did it!' he mused, 'no juggler could have shown greater sleight of hand — and to think that while I was watching him put the ring into the box he managed to slip in a love-letter also — or rather was not that his motive for suddenly going into the next room? But where was it hidden while I was looking at the ring? Verily, he has outwitted me!' Again the simple old priest began to laugh.

He sat down by the table, took out a huge blue cotton handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

'After all, it was an indignity,' he muttered, again growing uncomfortable, as he thought over the whole scene, 'to use a priest, the chaplain of *this* house,' — he clasped his hands — 'as a love-messenger! Could not that sharp fellow have found some one else in all these months to do such business for him? It was clever and bold after all — and how happy the child must be at this moment with her love-letter! Well, well! it cannot be

helped now — and after all, I have not the heart to be too angry about it.'

Lavinia had fled to her own room, locked the doors and pulled out the little square paper that was carefully fitted into the lid of the box, and on which were written in very small characters: '*All' amore mio.*' She unfolded it, and fell to reading Uberto's first and only love-letter with a hungry greediness only one degree removed from utter starvation.

This is what he wrote: —

'ANIMA MIA, — They thought to crush and annihilate our love the day they parted us, but their cruel opposition has strengthened my resolve to win you, and make you my own.

'Let us be faithful and true to one another, mio tesoro, let us persevere in our love and we will surely triumph in the end.

'Be of good courage, amore mio — trust me; no matter what they may say or do, never doubt of my love; it is deeper, truer, and more passionate than ever.

'I am working hard for our future happiness — it may take time, cuore mio, but what is that to you or to me? We are both young; we can afford to defy time!

'I dare not write any particulars, not having as yet found a safe means of conveying my letter to you, but it is necessary that we should meet and combine our strength to fight the common enemy. Every day you must be on the look-out after receiving this, when the mid-day gun is fired from St. Angelo; and when at that hour you see a little wherry with the flag of the Canottieri pass twice on the water before the terrace, it will mean that at the break of day on the next morning I will follow A. up the winding stairs that lead to the terrace.

'Be there to meet me. I shall have made sure you incur no danger.

'He who loves you more than life, and will be faithful even to death. U.'

To Lavinia's craving thirsting soul Uberto's words of love and comfort were like a heavenly dew. After reading over the letter many times, she clasped the little wrinkled paper to her breast, uttering mad expressions of endearment.

'Forgive me, my darling,' she cried passionately, 'if for one moment I doubted your love; forgive me for having so easily believed that you could break my heart when you were only trying to find a way to prove your love to me! I was ungrateful, forgive me — forgive me! Uberto mio!'

She kissed the letter fondly and reverently, and this mute caress bestowed upon something that had touched his hands only a short time before, made her feel nearer to him than she had been for months. She would have liked to go on dreaming and giving herself up to the joyful imaginings evoked by that little bit of paper, but Don Antonio was waiting for her, no doubt, in the next room, and marvelling at her protracted absence.

It was very important to ascertain at once if he were an ally, or had been simply an unconscious instrument in Uberto's hands.

She hid her lover's letter in her bosom, and went back to the study.

Don Antonio still sat by the table, his hands folded, his countenance, as Lavinia thought, more tranquil and kindly than ever — a fact which surprised her a little, and made it more difficult for her to play her part.

'Well, Don Antonio,' she said insinuatingly, and going up to him, 'you were saying that Don Uberto did not wish to give up his ring, but that he had done so in compliance with papa's request?'

She watched him keenly and put the question without a vestige of her former grief and indignation in her voice. In her attempt to read Don Antonio's thoughts in his face, she had forgotten to hide her own, and the priest at once saw the confirmation of his suspicions. He could now no longer doubt that Uberto had outwitted him and the entire Astalli family, and changed what had been meant as a death-warrant into a written eclogue of love.

'I believed at the time that Don Uberto had really come over to your parents' way of thinking. But now I have strong reasons to suspect that his abrupt change was due to a very different motive.' He spoke pointedly, trying to look into her eyes, but she turned them shyly away.

It was she then and not Uberto who had betrayed their secret to the messenger! The discovery was certainly mortifying, but she thought it wise to ignore it. After all, Don Antonio had no positive proof on which to base his suspicions, and it was best to leave him the benefit of a doubt.

'Do you not think it rather useless, Don Antonio, to try and fathom Uberto's motives in changing his mind?' she asked plausibly, and trying to look very innocent. 'Let us suppose that he did it for the best, otherwise I should be so very very unhappy!' and she heaved a little artificial sigh.

Don Antonio made no objection to this; he really could not find one which it would have been advisable to bring forward just then.

After all, no words of his could undo what had been done. If he had unwittingly soothed and comforted the sorrowing and brought hope to the despairing, while attempting to do his duty, why should he be over sad about it? And if Don Uberto Casale, by changing his tragic performance into a comedy, had prevented the accomplishment of an evil action — for it was an evil action, he thought, to part young loving hearts for no better reasons than vain worldly considerations — why should he regret it? But he had still a part to play in that comedy, and he wished to go through it as speedily and with as much dignity as possible for the sake of his robe, more than for his own — so he tried to look very innocent and unsuspicious. But neither the simple old priest nor the straightforward young girl had much talent

for acting, and they played their parts even too poorly to fool each other.

Don Antonio even felt ashamed of himself, and tried to shake down his ruffled feathers by returning simply to the last object of his mission.

'Now, my dear child,' he began after a rather long and awkward pause, 'let us talk of your immediate duties towards your parents and cease to think of Don Uberto Casale's motives or actions in all this. You have before you a most painful ordeal, I know, and you must make up your mind to obey promptly and without a murmur. Remember, Lavinia, that in this life great trials, which seem beyond endurance, when patiently borne, turn out to be blessings, and causes of great happiness ——'

'Oh yes! they do indeed!' interrupted Lavinia brightly.

The priest was slightly disconcerted at this warm approval of his words before he had had time to explain them.

'I mean,' he resumed, 'that by giving me your ring to take at once to your mother, you will be doing something so supernaturally heroic, that God cannot but reward your self-abnegation even in this world.'

While listening to his last words Lavinia began to walk the floor with long tragic steps, clasping and unclasping her hands, and rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

'How cruel of you to ask me to relinquish the only object I have left that he gave me! They parted me from my betrothed — now they would tear from me even the memory of him!'

'My child,' answered Don Antonio persuasively, 'your mother believes she can assure your happiness by acting as she does.'

'My happiness indeed!' cried Lavinia. 'They only wish to torture me. What does it matter to mamma whether I return Uberto's ring or not, now that she has the one I gave him?' Then, suddenly lowering her tone,

which she had been striving to maintain at a loud and tragic pitch, she added quietly, 'Don Antonio, I have changed my mind — I will do as mamma bids me; you may take it to Uberto, as you promised him.'

She slowly drew the ring from her finger and handed it to him with an uncertain enigmatic smile.

Don Antonio had been through just such a scene an hour before, and was beginning to learn something of the cunning of men and women when in love. His suspicions, which had been allayed by Lavinia's tragic manner, now returned in full force, and he was almost grateful to her for not having gone into the next room in search of a box and a love-letter, as Uberto had done under similar circumstances. There was no letter to be carried now, that was evident; but Lavinia's manner and suppressed smile in handing him the ring, proved amply that none was expected, and that the act of returning the ring was in itself the answer.

'Pray show it to mamma,' said Lavinia meekly, 'and after dinner you had better take it to Uberto.'

'Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind!' he exclaimed, rising impatiently from his seat by the table. 'Your mother can send it by whom she pleases; I am not going to carry any more — any more ——'

'Oh, Don Antonio!' cried Lavinia reproachfully, 'have you forgotten your solemn promise to Don Uberto?'

'True, true,' sighed the priest, taking the ring and rising to depart.

A quarter of an hour later the chaplain and Lavinia were partaking of a cold and hasty dinner, while dessert was being served to the rest of the family. Don Antonio had been labouring for other people's interests and bearing the brunt of young folks' unfortunate love affairs since mid-day, and he was very weary and hungry; he therefore ate his meal with concentrated attention, refusing to see the many glances shot at him by the Princess.

When his hunger was appeased, he began to look about and noticed with mingled feelings of shame and satisfaction that Lavinia was not only unusually cheerful, but helped herself to every dish that was served to her. He then condescended to answer an inquiring anxious look of the Princess's by a nod and a smile, and an imperceptible gesture indicating the breast-pocket of his cassock.

But even this was poor comfort to the Princess. Lavinia wore Uberto's ring instead of her own on her fourth finger, and young ladies should not wear rings except when engaged. The effect on the public would be the same, she thought, for there was no one to explain to the world at large that Lavinia's engagement ring had a ruby in it and not a turquoise, and had this been feasible, the very fact of her wearing a ring which had played an important part in her engagement, was of itself unbecoming, not to say compromising. And now, to crown this new succession of misadventures, Lavinia was eating a hearty dinner, and for the first time in many months, took a lively interest in the general conversation. All things considered, it was but natural that many perplexing doubts and fears should disturb the Princess Astalli's spirit.

When the family party finally withdrew to the library, the sight of the ruby ring which Don Antonio produced from the depths of his ecclesiastic pocket was scarcely sufficiently soothing and reassuring to restore her equanimity. Don Antonio entered into no particulars, but simply stated the bare facts of his visit to the young ladies' study, and having obtained the Princess's permission to accomplish the remaining portion of his errand, he left the house as soon as he could.

CHAPTER XVI

To the Romans of those days a mysterious charm still clung to the banks of the Tiber.

The constant accumulation of sand, left by the many inundations which had succeeded each other during centuries, had long ago formed broad slopes at the foot of some of the quaint rugged little houses, whose walls at other points rose directly out of the rapidly-flowing waters. Gradually, strange trees had taken root in these little stretches of land, extending their stunted and maimed branches downward into the rapid current which distorted and seemed to torment them in its ceaseless flowing. Beneath these, in luxuriant thickness, the grass pricked up its slender green spikes, and naked frolicsome urchins disported themselves, rolling from the soft sward into the tawny shallow water, while their mothers stretched their lines and hung out their wash to dry.

Their homes were in those black beetle-browed piles of brick and mortar behind the heavy-covered balconies, formed by irregular projecting beams and rafters overgrown with ivy, grape, and pumpkin vines, the whole harmonising so well with the capricious workings of nature as to make one forget that man ever had anything to do with the building of them.

The times were past when the classic Romans adored their 'Flavus Tiber,' and with their poetic fondness for adorning the simplest effects of nature with imaginary qualities, believed that in its waters gold-dust floated with the sand. Perhaps it may have been true in those

days, when gods acted as men, or rather men as gods, but the prosaic matter-of-fact Roman of to-day only sees mud and earth in the cloudy waters of the Tiber, through which never a ray of golden sunshine penetrates to sparkle and dance with its own reflection.

And yet it is not without a sigh that he stands by, passively contemplating the great works, now far advanced, which are meant to protect the old city from future inundations. The capricious serpentine windings of the river have been straightened, the gentle green slopes cut away, the beautiful old garden destroyed, and the stream flows some fifty feet below the hideous travertine walls, which close it in like the water of a deep-sunk dock. No such thing as a broad embankment or a graceful spacious descent to the water's edge has been contrived to relieve the cold monotony of those rigid lines, traced by the most prosaic of mankind — an Italian engineer.

It is more than probable that the Romans were scarcely conscious of the charm that nature is said to exercise when left to manifest herself freely; but only when the colossal work began to destroy with relentless hand all the familiar scenes of their childhood, did they learn to regret what they had been unconscious of possessing.

The taste for sport of any kind, except the 'giuoco del pallone,' was then of very recent date in Rome. Such things as racing, boating, rowing, and athletic games in general, were considered a prerogative of foreigners, and particularly of the English who wintered in Rome.

The Papal authorities disliked everything which savoured of a public meeting in their fear of the propagation of revolutionary ideas, and strenuously discouraged them except for charitable purposes. The annexation of Rome to the kingdom of Italy brought about a radical change in this as in many other respects.

Secret societies no longer being necessary, the serious

politicians and promoters of the newly acquired liberty, began at once to found free open associations, some monarchical, some radical, and many commercial and industrial.

Meanwhile the younger generation, just then blooming into manhood and not being overburdened with political or party enthusiasm, thought only of imitating men of their own age in other countries, and set to work speedily to found all sorts of clubs and societies, both social and athletic. One of the first and most popular of these was a rowing club, which went by the high-sounding name of 'Club dei Canottieri del Tevere.' The club-house was a great, awkward, two-storied châlet, built on a raft which lay some eight or ten yards out on the river, and besides being securely anchored was moored to the shore by four chain cables. At various times it had been moved from one bank to the other of the river, according to the changing depth of the water, or the convenience of the members, and at the time of our story it was anchored below the Ponte Sisto on the same side as the Palazzo Astalli, near a gentle green slope of the shore where a convenient pathway led to the drawbridge which connected it with the land. There was a billiard-room and a large sitting-room on the first floor near the water's edge, surrounded by a broad verandah covered with a thick green awning; and the floor above was entirely composed of small dressing-rooms for the members. It was mostly frequented in the spring and summer, before the Romans fled from the heat of the city to their mountain castles or to the sea-shore. The members of the club generally started in their boats for their usual exercise in view of the coming July races long before day, but there were many who preferred the cool of the evening, or even spent their nights on the water, if there happened to be a moon.

At certain hours the verandah presented a very ani-

mated picture, as seen by the passers-by who paused on the bridge and looked down at the floating châlet moored just beyond its arches. Peals of laughter were wafted upward by the 'Ponentino' breeze, proving to the listeners that the loungers who smoked cigarettes there and absorbed iced sherbets were not overburdened with woeful preoccupations.

Don Uberto Casale had been one of the chief promoters of the club, and an indefatigable member up to the time of his meeting with Donna Lavinia degli Astalli. But his passionate pursuit of the fair maiden and subsequent engagement, followed by the sudden rupture, had so occupied his time and thoughts as not to allow of his taking an active part in his companions' pursuits during the last four months.

Notwithstanding the signal failure of his attempt to corrupt Prince Astalli's gardener, he still dwelt on the possibility of his meeting Lavinia on the terrace some day, with or without Angelo's connivance.

He became convinced that it was the only feasible plan, considering the habits of the family and Lavinia's surroundings; and instead of destroying the missive which the gardener had refused to carry to Lavinia, he put it in his pocket and sat down to excogitate some other way of sending it to her.

Don Antonio appeared as a divine messenger on that day, and without stopping to consider whether his plan were wise or not, he decided to adopt it and run the risk of the consequences.

When the old priest returned with Lavinia's ring, Uberto knew that all was well. The next morning his unexpected appearance at the club was welcomed with a cordial and universal 'Evviva!' by his friends and companions. To those who expressed surprise at this sudden return, he made a pretext of his interest in the coming regatta, the impossibility of riding or fencing in such

hot weather, and the absolute need of exercise felt by those who are used to athletics.

He took his sculls and was to be seen on the water at very irregular hours. Sometimes he would appear late, when the others were returning home, and heedless of the noonday heat, would start upon a solitary pull down the river toward the Marmorata and Ripa Grande.

When he had sufficiently impressed upon his friends his depraved taste for going out when the sun was hottest, and they had ceased to pay attention to his erratic movements, he thought the time had come to row up the Tiber before the Palazzo Astalli and give Lavinia the signal agreed upon for their meeting.

As the gun of Castel Sant' Angelo announced to the city the hour of noon, he emerged from under the arches of the bridge, and keeping his boat well in the middle of the swift stream, passed twice before the Palazzo Astalli.

From behind her closed shutters Lavinia had waited and watched for many days with beating heart. Before the gun was fired she always hoped that Uberto would not be there, because she was afraid, and her heart misgave her that what she was doing was not right. But when the report boomed out, echoed, and died away and her lover had not appeared, a great sadness seized her, and she would weep bitter despairing tears of disappointment.

When at last she espied the little boat with its blue flag waving gracefully over the water, and Uberto's figure swinging to and fro with the even stroke of the oars, a great joy filled her heart, and all fears and doubts, all sense of propriety or duty, were swept away in a great wave of intense delight.

During the remainder of the day she moved about like one in a dream, one thought filling her mind and chasing away all others.

'I shall see my love to-morrow,' she repeated aloud

when she was alone, and as she listened to her own words, the sweetness of their meaning made her smile. With the morning her doubts and misgivings returned. Was she about to commit a crime in thus disobeying her mother's wishes and doing a thing which she knew the world considered as the height of impropriety? But passion soon mastered these considerations and suggested many excuses for her action. Had she not a right to decide for herself, now that she was no longer a child? Had she not sworn to be true to this man? Could she abandon him when she knew how dearly she loved him, and how faithful he had been to her? Would it not be forsaking him not to go to him when he called her? And yet — a pang darted through her heart as she thought how deeply grieved her parents would be could they only know! And poor, dear, little Bianca — at the thought of the twin-sister's grief Lavinia felt the tears stealing into her eyes, and in order not to think too much about it she looked at her watch. Angelo would be on the terrace in a quarter of an hour — she knew it was time to be moving. She would have to proceed very slowly and carefully, though there was not really much danger of being spied upon. Bianca alone slept near her — Mademoiselle Gilberte's room was beyond the study, and the other members of the family were sleeping in remote parts of the house. Lavinia took off her little black slippers, so as to proceed even more noiselessly, and held them in her hand as she slipped out of her room through the door opening into the hall which ran behind the girls' bedrooms, and from this through the long line of drawing-rooms which ended with the terrace.

A faint light, either of the waning moon or of the coming dawn, guided her sufficiently to avoid stumbling over the furniture. When on the terrace, she ran swiftly across its full length and passed into the Belvedere, now crowded with summer flowers, toward a second

and smaller entrance through which Angelo would soon appear.

It would be best to avoid being seen by him, she thought, if that were possible, so she crouched behind a large vase which was half hidden by the door itself when it stood open, and there she waited. Her heart throbbed so violently and painfully that she was almost frightened.

Angelo turned the key in the rusty, noisy, old lock below in the street, and began slowly to ascend the steps. He pushed open the door above, thus completely screening the girl's crouching figure, and without turning his head, moved in the direction of the fountain, situated at the other end of the terrace.

As soon as he was concealed by the shrubbery, Lavinia sprang to her feet to run to the stairs, but scarcely had she taken a step forward when Uberto clasped her in his arms.

Angelo in the meantime, happily unconscious of the very important part he was playing in the meeting of the lovers, went about quietly watering his plants.

Uberto gently drew Lavinia into the shadow of the little landing of the stairs where they were almost out of sight. With tearful smiling eyes she looked up at him, and for some moments they were silent.

'How beautiful you are, Lavinia!' were his first words, as he kissed her brow and her soft fresh lips.

He drew her closely to him with his left arm, and with his free hand held one of hers which he now and then raised to his lips.

'Amore, amore mio!' whispered Lavinia, 'I am so happy that you love me still.'

To which he answered with many burning oaths of everlasting faith, and kissed a fresh seal on each.

It was not that Lavinia feared he could ever love another woman as he loved her — women never realise the mortifying fact until it is too late — but she loved to

hear him repeat the sweet promises and endearing words, of which she had been deprived so long.

Interwoven with these came the story of all he was doing in the attempt to make a fortune, and of his hopes of finally succeeding in winning her parents' consent.

But Lavinia, knowing them better than he, shook her head despondently.

'It is madness to hope they will ever give it!' she said sadly.

'But, darling, we will make them!' he rejoined. 'When I can offer you a home and make it lovely with all that you have been used to, what more can they desire?'

'Uberto mio, you can never understand their way of thinking! They say you have lost caste, and so lowered yourself by going into business as to make such a marriage a mésalliance, just as if you were the son of a wealthy ambitious shoemaker or a dry-goods merchant.'

'Do they say that?' asked Uberto, a little astonished and considerably amused. 'Dio mio! How many surprises their friends and relatives are keeping in store for them! Soon everybody will have to work or die of hunger — with these new laws — and it will be all the better for them if they do!'

'Amore,' said Lavinia suddenly, 'do not wait their pleasure, take me away with you now!'

'I wish I could, my darling,' he exclaimed, passionately clasping her to his breast. 'I would not hesitate but for your sake. Were I to take you at your word, you would never forgive me later, when you had learned the full meaning and weight of such a step.'

Lavinia shook her head incredulously.

'There are many things you cannot understand now, sweet one,' he continued, 'but when we are married I will explain them to you.'

Only a few moments before, Lavinia when alone had

trembled like an aspen leaf at the sight of the old gardener who adored the ground she walked upon, and now, as she felt Uberto's strong arm around her, she was willing to face her parents' wrath, and the disapprobation of all the world, rather than be parted from him. Had he asked her to follow him then and there, transported as she was by her passion, she would have done so unhesitatingly, forgetting everything, — her duty and her filial love, her own good name, and even her religion, to follow the man she loved.

With infinite tact and delicacy Uberto tried to explain the dangers of such a course; he told her that her reputation was dearer to him than his own good name, and that by following the instinct of both their hearts instead of the social laws which governed them, he would be wilfully sacrificing what was dearest to him in this world.

But she, in her innocence, could not understand. She had heard him so often scoff at and denounce those social laws, that she could not now see why he should suddenly begin to respect and obey them at the price of their future happiness. She had been told that it was the most fearful misdeed on the part of a maiden of her station to be found alone with a man. She had been guilty of that misdeed in coming to meet Uberto in the misty dawn of the summer morning, and she was surprised to find that she felt in nowise dishonoured either from a religious point of view or from her own. Why then should it be a dishonour for her to go away with him, since they had really been alone on the terrace together, and go quietly to the parish priest to be married, like those desperate lovers of whom Uberto had once told her?

At a loss to explain these inconsistencies, Uberto began to tell her instead what he wished her to do during the time which must needs pass until he could boldly return to the Palazzo Astalli and renew his offer of marriage.

'You must be very firm, my darling, and resist any kind of pressure your parents bring to bear on your resolutions,' he said. 'When you feel weary at heart, and discouraged, think of our love, sweet one, and of all I am doing to overcome the difficulties, and your courage will return. Promise me that you will never consent to any thing they may propose to you, without consulting me.'

'I promise,' said Lavinia, solemnly closing her eyes.

He took her little hand in his and kissed her drooping lids.

'Tell me something about the Sorellina,' he said, brightening at the thought of little Bianca — so gentle and tender.

'Sorellina weeps with me, Uberto,' answered Lavinia. 'She lives in fear and trembling of the fate that awaits her. Papa will not hear of her becoming a Sister of Charity, and she will have either to become a Barberina or remain a "zitellona" in Casa Astalli!' At the thought of remaining a spinster in Casa Astalli Lavinia grew a shade paler. It might befall her as well as Bianca, and could anything be more appalling?

'Tell the little sister not to be disheartened or afraid. They cannot nowadays force her to enter a convent against her will; and if she will only be firm and brave, as I wish you to be, Lavinia, she too will win some day! Tell her that I mean to protect her, as if she were my own sister. And give her my love.'

'Shall I give your love to Don Antonio also?' inquired Lavinia archly.

'Bless him!' exclaimed Uberto with enthusiasm. 'He is the best and only friend we have, Lavinia! It is, thanks to him, that we meet here to-day. I wonder what he would say, by the bye, if he knew it!' Uberto laughed.

'We will tell him some day,' said Lavinia, greatly

amused; 'it will be such fun to see his dear, soft, saintly locks stand on end!'

Uberto looked about uneasily — the light of day was fast spreading over the green masses on the terrace.

'It is getting late, dear,' he said with a sigh, 'I fear I ought to be going.'

'Oh, not yet! not yet!' pleaded Lavinia, clinging to him closely. 'We have still so many things to say to each other! I have scarcely had time to realise that all this happiness is not a dream, before you tell me you must go away and leave me ——'

'My darling, let me go,' he pleaded softly and reluctantly, as he returned her caresses. 'The slightest imprudence might ruin our chances of meeting again — do you not see the danger?'

'Oh, Uberto mio!' she cried tearfully, 'how shall I live through the dreary days until you come again?'

'I will soon come again, love!' he whispered, bending his head to give her one more kiss. But something he saw beyond the fair face that was raised to his, made him pause suddenly, and Lavinia, still clinging to him, turned her head to see what had brought such a look of astonishment into his eyes.

Angelo the gardener stood before them, a pail of water in each hand, watching them awestruck and motionless with terror. In their surprise neither of the lovers moved for a moment, and Angelo believed that he saw an apparition. It flashed through his mind that perhaps St. Peter, in whose honour he said a 'Paternoster' every night, had sent him this vision that he might play the numbers at the lottery, win a big sum, and so pay off his debt to Sor Pacifico the Jew in the Ghetto, who had loaned him the three hundred scudi necessary to ransom his son, Micheluccio, from the hated conscription. He knew his 'Libro dei Sogni' by heart — the book of dreams giving the corresponding numbers to be played, which is

sure to be found in every poor house in Rome. Lovers meeting was number 80; lovers surprised was number 74; a winding stairway was number 12. He would play the terno, 80, 74, 12, and — Lavinia smiled.

'Dio buono,' groaned Angelo, forgetting St. Peter and the vision of wealth, 'a ghost that smiles means death — our young lady is going to die!' and overpowered by emotion and the varied thoughts which had scarcely taken a second to rush through his startled brain, he let fall his large tin buckets, so that they rolled over the floor with a fearful clatter.

The noise broke the charm. Lavinia had guessed what was passing in the old man's thoughts, and daintily picking her way over the flooded stones, came and stood beside him that he might assure himself that what he had seen was not an apparition. But his fright, if anything, increased instead of diminishing when he realised that the lovers had actually been alone together on his terrace for Heaven only knew how long.

'Signorini miei! what have you done!' he exclaimed, his old legs fairly giving way under him in his anguish and bewilderment. 'If anybody sees you here together we shall all be ruined! What would the Principe think of old Angelo? — and the Signora Principessa? Just heavens! Angelo would rather be dead.' He wrung his hands in his despair. 'Away — away with you, Signorino mio,' he said, turning to Uberto. 'A son of the Marchese Casale should enter the Palazzo Astalli by the big door, and not creep up the backstairs like a "brigante," to compromise a faithful old servant, who hoped to die in the service of this most excellent house without reproach, as his father did before him.'

'Look here, Angelo,' said Lavinia, 'nobody is going to compromise you unless you do it yourself. You are making such a noise about the most harmless thing in the world that one might think you had been bought over by

our enemies to torment us and persecute us! And yet you told Don Uberto that you loved your "padroncina"!'

'Do not ask me if I love you, Signorina,' said Angelo with the respectful familiarity still existing in Italy, thank Heaven, between masters and faithful old servants. 'I told that young gentleman there'—he pointed to Casale—'only the other day, that I would throw myself into the river if you commanded me, but I will not hold a candle, as we say, to any of his mad exploits! Tell Don Uberto to go away, Donna Lavinia; he will do it if you tell him. For as surely as God lives, if he does not, we shall have the most frightful row and scandal in this house that has ever been heard of since the days of Pontius Pilate.'

'Coraggio, Angelo,' said Uberto laughing, 'I will be off in a minute. Just let me bid farewell to your padroncina.'

'Addio, my love, my treasure,' exclaimed Lavinia, giving him both her hands, which he raised to his lips. 'My thoughts will be with you at every moment of the day, and no matter what they do to make me forget you, my heart will always be with you—always—always!'

Her love gave her beautiful features an expression of intensity and inspired depth, such as had never been seen by the inexperienced old rustic on any human face.

He watched the lovers in awe and perplexity while they exchanged their parting kisses and promises, forgetful of his presence. Lavinia's lashes were wet with tears as Uberto moved towards the little door, and with that feminine instinct which teaches all women that their greatest power over men lies in their own weakness, she turned her eyes on Angelo, that the tangible proof of her grief might touch his heart.

Nor did she err in her calculations. He moved uneasily from one foot to the other, turned his head away in order not to see her tear-stained cheeks, and finally stepped

out into the open space and began looking about as though to see whether any one were watching the group on the terrace.

'My tears have made him our accomplice,' said Lavinia in a low voice to Uberto, who was now standing on the threshold. 'See — he is covering your retreat!'

'Addio, anima mia!' said Uberto, passionately embracing Lavinia once more before he turned to descend the little dark stairs.

CHAPTER XVII

BIANCA awoke that morning at an unusually late hour. She called to Lavinia, it being their customary way of rousing each other, and receiving no answer, jumped out of bed, felt her way in the dark to the window, opened the blinds, and was amazed to see how high the sun was in the heavens already. She then opened Lavinia's door, and was not less surprised to find her room empty and flooded with light. Lavinia had evidently awaked early and crept out to do a little gardening by herself, though it was rather strange, as she had suggested so many excuses for not doing so when Bianca had proposed it on the previous evening. Bianca returned to her own room and began busying herself about her toilette, a long and complicated affair, as the girls had to combine their modern taste for cleanliness with their mother's absolute objection to anything resembling a tub. It was not considered proper or modest. Every now and then, but generally in summer, they were allowed to take a warm bath, clothed in coarse linen wraps made like bags and tied at the back of the neck, and that was considered amply sufficient.

While she was dressing, Bianca pondered on her sister's behaviour. There had undeniably been a great change since each had sent back the other's ring. Lavinia had begun to use her wings, as it were, and their strength increased with every hour. What had been meant to reduce her to submission had in reality taught her to understand her own character. Lavinia had found out that she had a will at the precise moment when her

mother was most anxious to persuade her that she had none. Bianca asked herself how Lavinia had come by so much firmness and fearlessness. Was it possible that she could be what she was unless some secret influence were constantly guiding and sustaining her? Bianca began to suspect that some sort of secret intelligence existed between Uberto and her sister, improbable and impossible as it seemed. Even her outward manner had undergone a radical change since that day. Her voice had a combative ring in it, her opinions were more positive, her expressions more decided; and what she said contained none of those many little social hypocrisies which formed the basis of most conversations in her mother's society. Lavinia lost no opportunity of inciting her sister to resist their parents, to think and act for herself, as she was trying to do, and she often spoke of the fortune which naturally made Bianca more independent than she could ever be.

She seemed to delight in pushing Bianca forward into awkward positions in order to come to her rescue as an openly-acknowledged ally.

Little Bianca grew sad as she thought it all over. She was afraid that her sister would some day commit a rash imprudence, which, instead of bettering her position, would only render it more terrible.

She knew not why, but somehow Lavinia's unusual disappearance at that hour troubled her. She finished dressing hurriedly, and went in search of her sister. As she reached the drawing-room, Lavinia ran in, and was almost upon her before she was aware of her presence. The room was already darkened for the hot summer day, and Lavinia, coming into the cool gloom from the broad daylight, could not distinguish at first the objects within.

'Good-morning, Lavinia,' said Bianca, revealing her presence. 'What have you been about all the morning?

Why did you not call me when you got up?' Then, after looking hard at her sister for a moment, she continued, 'How agitated you seem! What has happened to put you into such a state?'

Lavinia's cheeks were flushed and she moved about nervously, trying to avoid Bianca's scrutinising gaze.

'Nothing is the matter, Sorellina,' she answered impatiently. 'The air this morning is really delicious! I never felt so strong and well in my life before. There was an unusual breeze upon the water, and all the flowers lifted their drooping heads to be kissed by it. So did I, — like the flowers! And now I feel refreshed and ready to meet the whole world if it were against me!'

All this sounded rather extraordinary. Bianca watched her as she walked up and down the great dark hall, her hands clasped behind her, her cheeks rosy-red and her great eyes shining like dark emeralds in the uncertain light. Bianca opened the glass door and looked out, hoping to find there some explanation of Lavinia's mood. But she only saw Angelo busy at work as usual, and she was more puzzled than ever.

'Bianca!' cried Lavinia, suddenly standing still. 'I mean to speak out my grief so loudly that all Rome shall hear me. I mean to cry, and weep, and sob aloud until my tears melt these stone walls. I mean to let the world know that it is infamous, iniquitous, impossible that we two should be separated from one another.' She spoke very rapidly, in clear ringing tones. 'If at the sight of my grief they do not relent, then I will rebel. I will run away from this house and join Uberto!'

Bianca rushed to her and laid her hand upon her mouth to stop the flow of her words.

'Hush, hush!' she groaned, 'you have had a sunstroke, or you have an attack of "perniciosa" fever and are out of your mind! Come with me, dear, let me put you to bed and call the doctor.'

'I am neither mad nor ill,' answered Lavinia indignantly, 'I am sick and tired of my parents and my home!'

'My darling, have you forgotten all the sweet virtues of our childhood?' asked Bianca gently.

'New virtues and new duties have taken their place,' rejoined Lavinia; 'and they teach me that I must follow Uberto, just as they teach you not to become a Carmelite. We have been wilfully kept in the dark about our rights and personal responsibilities. If we only knew one-half of what they know, I am sure they could not argue with us for a moment. Our ignorance is like a mist that hangs before our minds, and prevents our seeing things clearly, but I feel that the broad light of truth and justice is on our side of the cloud, and not on theirs, and that if we could only succeed in rending that cloud we should be a match for them.'

'What is there in the world that can annul or diminish our parents' authority?' inquired Bianca, always ready with a moral query.

'New duties,' answered Lavinia curtly.

'How can you prove that?'

'Easily enough!' rejoined Lavinia, 'and by our own example. If you become a Carmelite and take those vows, you will be a perjurer, for you will be swearing to love, cherish, and obey rules that are odious to you. If I, loving Uberto, were to marry another man, I should be a false wife. It is in the laws of nature that each one of us should work out our destiny, independently of our elders, who cannot see things as we see them, nor judge for us as we can for ourselves, since they are of another time, and another generation, and the world shows no signs of standing still.'

'I wonder if what you say is really true,' said Bianca doubtfully.

'I know it is!' exclaimed Lavinia enthusiastically. 'Uberto told me so, and he knows a great deal more about all these things than anybody else.'

'Uberto told you so!' repeated Bianca aghast. 'When and where did you speak to Uberto about it?'

Lavinia had not intended to tell Bianca about her interview with Uberto — at least not immediately — but she had never kept a secret from her twin sister, and she unconsciously fell back into the old habit of confidence. Bianca's exclamation of reproachful astonishment had taken her by surprise.

'Well, yes! I have seen him, and talked to him,' she said rather desperately. 'He loves me, and we have renewed our promise to wait for each other, or never to marry at all. He has told me exactly what I am to do, and I mean to obey him and no one else. He is now my lord and master, and his authority is second only to that of our Holy Mother Church. We talked about you, Sorellina,' she added persuasively, in a changed voice, 'and he bade me give you his love, and tell you that your case was far more easy to manage than ours, and that all the ecclesiastical powers in Rome would be on your side and help you to disobey the parents!'

'Saints in Heaven! you have seen Uberto and spoken to him! It cannot be true, Lavinia, your mind is surely wandering; you could not have wilfully committed that mortal sin! It is such a great wickedness, that were papa to know of it he would lock you up for the remainder of your days, and no one could blame him for his severity.'

'I do not feel in the least like a criminal,' answered Lavinia, sitting down at last. 'In fact I was never happier in my life. He has taught me a great many things papa and mamma know nothing about, and he says that if I have the courage to bear up bravely against all pressure, I shall not only triumph but at last convert them. Oh, Bianca,' she added mischievously, 'just think of converting mamma!'

Both the girls laughed at the preposterous idea; but

soon Bianca's brow clouded again, and she became absorbed in a new train of thought.

Lavinia had been alone for an indefinite space of time with a young man. There was the fact staring her in the face in all its cruel undeniable force. She had a definite and positive belief, which was none the less stable and deep-rooted because not analysed, that nothing more shameful, wicked, or disgraceful could befall a maiden of Lavinia's birth. It was the annihilation of all virtue and respectability, besides being the greatest of worldly misfortunes. She had not the courage to say to Lavinia, 'My poor darling, you are a lost woman,' for she loved her more devotedly, more tenderly than ever; but she believed that every one else who happened to hear of the shameful circumstance would think and say it of her, and that unfortunately every one had a right to do so; though she did not at all understand the exact meaning of the dreadful words.

While the two girls continued to discuss psychological questions, and tried to solve them, each in her own peculiar way, according to the circumstances in which she had been placed, or the influences which had been most powerfully brought to bear on her personal experiences, their mother was fretting over the minute details of their lives, giving them an importance which would seem almost impossible to one not used to the narrow limits and conventional restrictions of the existence of such as she, and not familiar with her surroundings.

She knew nothing of the workings of her daughters' minds, being a slave herself to outward forms of submission; she candidly believed that those subject to her should restrict, and if possible crush all free mental soarings into broader spheres, as she did, for fear of sinning against the innumerable narrow dogmas within which she confined her religion.

If Lavinia and Bianca had not yet submitted, it was

entirely due to some external lack of severity on her part, and she went to work conscientiously to discover where the flaw was to be found. She knew absolutely nothing of the immaterial love of honest man and maiden. Such things were possible — accidents will happen — but they were carefully hidden or ignored. Love-matches, when not offering the requisite compensations of birth or of a handsome dowry, were considered the result of a badly-balanced intelligence, and were the object of universal disapprobation in Roman society.

The Princess knew a great deal more about the love affairs of married people. Young girls were protected from such dangers by their ignorance and the vigilant eyes of their mothers; whereas the sudden freedom granted to young married women, and their inexperience, threw open the doors to temptation, and exposed them to irreparable misfortunes.

Dramas of passion, scenes of jealousy or even of despair were often enacted before Princess Astalli's eyes in her own world, and though a very pure and blameless woman herself, she had been forced to sympathise with some and blame others, while trying to do for all what she thought best.

Women were considered as simple idiots until they were married; and some men wished their wives to remain such even after marriage, upon the plea that a woman, to be virtuous, must be stupid and ignorant.

It was only after the maiden had been robed in the marital honours of a new name and a new home that the meanings of the words, love, passion, jealousy and despair became clear to her.

When Count Gianluca presented himself to the Princess as a suitor for her daughter Donna Adele, the first question he asked of his future mother-in-law was whether that young lady had been allowed to 'read books.' He added immediately that in case of an affirmative answer, he begged to withdraw his offer of marriage.

The Princess was happy to assure him that her daughter had only read the lives of a few saints, besides her prayer-book, whereupon the marriage was arranged. One of the most obvious consequences of this manner of education was to inspire the men with a saintly horror of having anything to do with young ladies in society, save as partners at a ball; and the latter finding themselves neglected for the more entertaining society of young married women, naturally clubbed together and wandered about freely arm in arm, when not engaged for a dance.

They were not taught to try to please; and their manners were expected to be as simple as their clothes, for fear of being accused of coquetry. It was very hard to find husbands for girls who were suspected of being fond of dress, or of worldly amusements; the more retiring and pious they seemed, the more they were watched and taken into consideration by mothers in search of wives for their elder sons.

This utter want of affectation gave a peculiar and sometimes startling charm to these women in after life, when they had become mistresses of great houses; and even those who by their rather pronounced taste for amusements not exactly moral, or by their love of admiration, laid themselves open to severe censure, never completely lost that early simplicity of manner.

The true aim of the Romans, however, in guarding their daughters thus, was to make them home-loving, virtuous, and submissive wives, and if the reaction was sometimes too violent, and some turned out badly, let it be said to their honour that most of them are high-principled good women.

If Princess Astalli had not succeeded in her intentions, it was certainly not due to a want of good-will and energetic measures. And yet in the face of her defeat, she concluded her meditations by an act of contrition for not

having done all that was in her power to bring the two erring children to their proper senses, followed by a firm resolve not to let another day pass until she had done so.

Of late Lavinia had chosen the Belvedere as her favourite resort. Of a morning before the sun was too hot and rendered useless the thick shade of the luxuriant foliage, she would sit there with her books and work, and dream of Uberto. There was the little green door through which he had come to her, there she had listened to his voice, and with tears and kisses had parted from him. She loved to live over that blissful hour, and dream of the future with Uberto's image bright before her mind. Sometimes she watched the little door, imagining that she saw Uberto move towards her to take her in his arms. She loved to remember the exact expression of his eyes, as they smiled down into hers, and their sadness when parting from her.

One morning she sat on her favourite bench, her arms resting on the curved iron railing, her eyes bent downward and her thoughts far away in the beautiful land of maiden dreams. Every now and then she produced a little crimson plush box from the depths of her pocket, took out a folded paper, read it, and put it back into its hiding-place over the ring. It was Uberto's letter, and though she knew it by heart she seemed never to tire of reading it. As she was closing the lid she saw her mother walking down the shady pathway towards her, and she hastily slipped the little object into her pocket.

The Princess sat down beside her as if she intended to take up her station there, and Lavinia waited in some surprise to hear her speak.

'I have just been to your room in search of you, my child,' she said very naturally. 'I wished to ask you to give me Don Uberto Casale's ring, which it ill becomes you to wear.'

Lavinia looked straight out before her, and not a muscle of her face moved.

'As I did not see it on your finger at luncheon I presumed it must be amongst your things. I have been searching for it, and not finding it, I conclude that you have it somewhere on your person. You will kindly give it to me.'

The Princess held out her hand.

'Mamma,' said Lavinia, rising immediately and turning to look her mother full in the face, 'you must not ask me to do one thing more than I have done. I do not like to seem disrespectful or wanting in any way towards you,' she added, seeing her mother's face grow ominously darker at every word; 'but I must warn you not to go too far — they say it is the last drop that makes the cup overflow.' Her voice was low and she spoke in measured terms, but her face, though calm, was as white as a lily.

'Dear Lavinia! I am so sorry you take it like this!' exclaimed the Princess, trying not to give too much weight to her words, and showing her teeth in what was meant for a smile. Every attempt to bring her daughter to subjection had thus far been the subject of a scene, for which she had blamed Don Antonio as an incapable manager, and for this very reason she had discarded the thought of employing him in this last attempt. She therefore meant to avoid the melodramatic at any price.

'After all,' she resumed, 'it is not of very great importance, you know, but since I said I wished you to give me that trinket, I must stand by my word, and I expect you to obey my request without further comments.' Lavinia did not move. With knitted brows and firmly set lips she stood before her mother, her head slightly turned to watch the flowing river.

'Well? — ' asked the Princess after a few moments' silence.

'Mamma, I will not give it to you.'

'What does this mean?' cried the Princess. 'Do you

think I am here to ask your opinion, whether you will or will not obey me? Do you dare say No, to me? I had only made a request thus far, now I command, and if necessary I will make you obey me.'

Her voice was cruel and hard, and the force of habit was strong with her child, who could not forget that she had never dared to disobey when thus spoken to. She trembled slightly and shrank back, a frightened look in her eyes. It had always been at that precise moment that she had succumbed as a child; the Princess knew it, and already felt sure of her victory. But another Lavinia had grown up within the one she thought she knew so well, and after the first surprise of the immediate clash of their two wills, the Princess was to learn that her sceptre was broken. As soon as Lavinia felt strong again she wished to be generous.

'Forgive me, dear mamma,' she said gently, 'I am so sorry to have made you angry. But if you love me, mamma mia, you will understand that I have suffered greatly during these months, and out of pity for my past sacrifices you will not even wish to take this last memory of my love from me!'

'Nonsense, child! Do not talk to me of sacrifices, memories, and love, they are the very things I am now trying to chase out of your silly head. Give me the ring!' And again she held out her hand proudly.

'Never, never, never!' exclaimed Lavinia, her whole manner changing, and her face aglow with passion.

'Ah! we shall see,' muttered the Princess through her teeth, and she made as though she would take hold of her child's right arm.

Lavinia could not wrestle with her mother; her whole soul revolted at such a possibility. Not even to save the greatest treasure in the world would she consent to resist the weight of her mother's hand upon her, but she grew desperate when she realised the attempt to despoil her by force.

With a rapid movement she turned so as to free her right hand, and, thrusting it into her pocket, she drew out the little box, concentrated all her nervous young strength, and threw it far out into the river.

She watched the curve it made in the air, and her glance followed the current from the spot where the box had sunk, until she saw it rise again to the surface and float onwards. Then she kissed her hand to it and murmured, 'Addio.'

Surprise closed the Princess's lips for some moments, and when she had fully taken in the extent of Lavinia's misdeed she gave vent to her anger in loud and passionate upbraidings.

Lavinia stood motionless, listening to her mother's torrent of abuse and invectives, a cold satisfied look in her calm white face, which went far towards increasing her mother's exasperation. She seemed neither wounded nor impatient, and when the Princess paused for want of breath, she quietly asked to be allowed to withdraw, and without waiting for permission, she crossed the terrace with a deliberate step and disappeared under the awning of the library door.

The Princess was left alone to chew the bitter cud of her own reflections.

'Mea culpa, mea culpa!' she said presently, beating her breast passionately. 'I thought I was true to the rigid old customs of this house, whereas I have allowed myself and everybody in it to become modernised! How true is it that even the just can fail — and how carefully one should watch that the devil take not advantage of one's weakness — God forgive me!'

Even though she had forced Lavinia to part with the ring, she had to acknowledge that she had not obtained the victory, morally speaking, nor was it one she could boast of to her husband or to Don Antonio. Don Antonio! The name was bitter in her mouth as she remem-

bered how she had laughed at that threat of his, when he had told her that what she took for the end would be but the beginning of this love affair. What was she to do with Lavinia? Could she allow her to remain in the family as an example of triumphant rebellion? There was Clemente to be considered. He was only four-and-twenty — what if he were to take it into his young head to set up an opposition to his parents, as Lavinia had done — to dare to think for himself, or choose a wife to suit his own taste instead of theirs?

She had failed to conquer Lavinia, but she meant to find a compensation for her wounded pride in Bianca's submissiveness. She needed that antidote, and went at once in search of the other daughter.

'I see by your shocked expression, my dear Bianca, that Lavinia has told you of her capricious insubordinate behaviour,' she said on entering Bianca's room, from which Lavinia had fled at the sound of her mother's footsteps. 'This proves sufficiently how sadly astray a child may be led by her own inclinations, when she will not consult her elders' experience and wisdom.'

Bianca knew that her turn had come. She stood looking at her mother with submissive deference, but her heart beat very fast as the Princess continued.

'After what has just occurred, you must understand that any further intimacy between you and Lavinia would be dangerous for your moral safety; and as I cannot send her out of the house you will have to return to the Convent at once. It is only anticipating by a few weeks our intention of leaving you there when we go to Vallinfreda.'

'I was aware of your intentions, dear mamma, and though I dreaded this moment I was anxious that you should speak clearly to me, so that I may put an end to this state of suspense and uncertainty.' Bianca paused a moment to steady her voice. 'Now, I may as well tell

you at once, mamma, that I have consulted many prelates who are your particular friends, and whom I see in our drawing-room, and I have made up my mind not to return to the Carmelite Convent.'

'Bianca!' groaned the Princess. 'This is too awful. Do you know what you are doing? You are not only resisting God, who authorises me to make you obey your religious calling, but you are defrauding the Barberine of the large fortune your aunt left you, with which to atone in some measure for the iniquitous law which leaves those poor nuns homeless and penniless.'

'If it be true that my aunt's money is mine to dispose of, the nuns shall never lack for anything. But I do not mean to sell my soul to let them have her inheritance. I mean to live a life of action, or remain what I am. I am sorry to see you look so shocked, dear mamma — but really, I can never become a Carmelite!'

'Never, did you say?' rejoined the Princess. 'Never? What am I to think has come over my daughters, since they both, and on the same day, use that word for the first time to me.'

'You must please to excuse me, mamma,' said Bianca, trying to be as sweet and persuasive as possible, 'if I try to explain more fully my thoughts on this matter, which you do not seem to understand. I acknowledge your full authority over me in all, except in this one particular. You may beat me, subject me to every kind of suffering and humiliation — I will not complain. But I alone am called to decide concerning solemn vows, on which depends, not your life, nor my father's, but my own. I admit that it is a new way of looking at such things, but I cannot help that, now that I am persuaded of its justice.'

'A great many new thoughts have found their way into my daughters' heads of late,' retorted the Princess savagely. 'I have had enough of this nonsense for

to-day. Whether you intend to answer the calling with which God had blessed you or not, matters little just now. You can argue it out with your conscience elsewhere than in the Palazzo Astalli. Suffice it for you to know that you are to return to the Barberine at once, and there you shall stay so long as I see fit to keep you. I have my reasons for separating you from your sister as soon as possible.'

'It is more for Lavinia's sake than for my own that I refuse to leave her just now,' answered Bianca very firmly.

'It is for her sake that I mean to part you — to-morrow!' answered her mother, rising and leaving the room.

The Princess had lost her temper — not an unusual occurrence with her — and had said more than was prudent or advisable. She was not at all sure how she could manage to make Bianca leave the house on the next day, but at the time she did not calculate the weight of her assertion. So eager was she to deal a thrust at her opponent which might wound, and perhaps disarm her, that she did not take the time to aim the blow. Even after it had been dealt she felt that Bianca was somehow beyond her reach. She did not know, however, that this was due solely to Bianca's belief that her presence was absolutely necessary to prevent Lavinia from committing some new irreparable folly; a thought which inspired the young girl with a firmness not natural to her. Bianca felt that she alone could watch her sister, and put a stop to those dangerous meetings of the lovers on the terrace, and that to obey her mother's command meant the sacrifice of her sister's reputation.

While Lavinia and Mademoiselle Gilberte listened with awe to Bianca's account of the new calamity that was threatening them, the Princess sat by her open window before her embroidery frame, but she was not thinking of her work. She was going over in her mind the

two scenes with her daughters, which had followed each other in such rapid succession, and wondering what she had done to deserve such a chastisement from Heaven. No cross, no misery, no humiliation could have been greater or harder to bear.

A knock at the door put an end to her meditation.

'Ah, Don Antonio,' she exclaimed defiantly, 'I wish you had been here half an hour ago, to hear Bianca tell me to my face that she would not go back to the Convent — and to see Lavinia throw Casale's ring into the river over my head rather than give it to me!'

She put up her glasses and looked at the priest's serious preoccupied face. 'What have you to say of such conduct, Signor Cappellano? Is it not scandalous?'

'I think, Eccellenza, that you have an exaggerated idea of your authority over your daughters.'

'This is the first time you express such an opinion,' replied the Princess, drawing herself up with ruffled dignity.

'It is the first time you have ever done me the honour of asking me my opinion,' he answered, with the slightest shadow of a smile in his blue eyes. 'Signora Principessa,' he resumed, seating himself, 'as you are so kind as to allow me to tell you what I think of your twin daughters' action, I will do so with pleasure.' He paused as if he were in the pulpit and had only given the text of his sermon to his hearers. As it was, his only listener looked annoyed, sighed, and was fain to resign herself to listen. 'Now with regard to Bianca. The first and most absolute condition required by the Church to sanction a maiden's seclusion in a convent is her own spontaneous, unconstrained desire to take the vows. Now, if Bianca were to take those vows in her present state of mind, they would be considered so contrary to the spirit of the Church that the ecclesiastical authorities would not hesitate to annul them and declare

them void, no matter how public and solemn you had endeavoured to make the ceremony.'

'To hear you,' put in the Princess with acrimony, 'one would think that we were tyrannically forcing our child to become a nun against her will!'

'You are only cavilling at my words, Princess. No one knows better than you, whether I have hit the meaning of your intentions, which were conceived long before Bianca was old enough to know what monastic life meant.'

The Princess feigned not to have understood Don Antonio's thrust.

'It is by the propagation of these theories amidst the ignorant multitude,' she said, 'that the best-intentioned are corrupting modern society and leading the masses astray. One would think, to hear you, Don Antonio, that the canons of the Church varied with the times! What have you to say against those blessed days when our convents were full of noble maidens, placed there by parents who are still held up to us as the models of all Christian virtues? Were they acting against your canonical laws?'

'They probably ignored them, as they ignored most things except the Liturgy of the Church, which took the place of Christian virtues in those times,' replied the priest. 'But I have my doubts that in many cases it was not so much through ignorance as through perversity, and to further their own ignoble, worldly purposes that they chose to disregard those laws. The canons of the Church have not changed, Signora Principessa,' declared the priest emphatically. 'The hearts of the people have undergone a transformation, and have learned to interpret them more worthily. As for the many thousand virgins who were forced to fill the convents of Rome in those days, not one in a hundred had been consulted before being deprived of the greatest of God's gifts, — her freedom. The other ninety-nine really were

not nuns at all, though they were considered as such by the world in general, and made to believe it themselves; nor were they bound by those vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which they had been forced to take while deprived of their free will to do otherwise. They were the slaves of circumstances, the victims of worldly considerations, and of sordid aims.'

'Mio Dio! What a rosary of blasphemous heresies!' murmured the Princess, sotto voce.

'Rest assured, Eccellenza,' quietly rejoined the priest, 'that I am merely telling you a few simple truths which no one ever dared to tell you before.'

'Enough!' gasped Princess Astalli.

'Yes; that is sufficient for to-day with regard to Bianca's monastic vocation,' acquiesced her tormentor. 'But I have not yet said what I think of Lavinia's case. No doubt you know better than I, being so thoroughly familiar with the Roman family annals, that it was much the same with regard to marriages. Young girls — your grandmother, for instance, and perhaps your mother — accepted the husbands proposed to them and who were not at all to their liking, because they had been led to believe that they had no right to do otherwise; and they were kept in ignorance of the highly important fact, that their own free consent was the one essential condition necessary to make a marriage valid in the eyes of the Church. Such marriages and such vows were in reality null and void, and those brides, Signora Principessa, the mothers of an illustrious offspring, were never really lawful wives.'

'I see,' said the Princess very severely, 'that I must crush the germs of anarchy and revolution which seem to have been wafted — God only knows how — into my family. No matter what you say, Don Antonio, so long as I live my children shall do as I wish. How can you suppose that I could favour Lavinia's disparagement, or

allow her to be led into poverty by her love for Uberto? Or that I could endure to see Bianca treading the streets of Rome, where she was born a princess, in the humble apparel of a Sister of Charity? Show me the book of canonical laws where it is written that I should subject myself and my daughters to such things!'

'Principessa,' answered Don Antonio, seeing that he could not keep the conversation on neutral ground, 'this discussion does not seem to interest or enlighten you, so with your permission we will put an end to it. But, before doing so, I think it is just as well that you should know, that, although Bianca cannot at present become a Sister of Charity in spite of you, being still a minor, the day she reaches her majority she can do as she pleases; and I fear you will think it very hard when I add, that the Church will raise no opposition to her following her own inclination, even though it be well known that it is contrary to your wishes.'

'Have you anything more to say?' inquired Princess Astalli indignantly. 'I have listened to your absurd talk long enough, but nothing you have said thus far equals this last paradox! I suppose you mean next to enumerate to me all the rights and privileges Lavinia enjoys in our democratic church?'

'Ah!' said Don Antonio with evident satisfaction, 'Lavinia's rights are much greater in the social and ecclesiastical order of things. In fact,' he added complacently, looking at the Princess from beneath his shaggy white eyebrows, 'I am not against considering Don Uberto and Lavinia already man and wife——'

'Married?—secretly married?' gasped the Princess. 'Is the world coming to an end?'

The poor old lady was so terrified that she was incapable of thinking; for a moment's reflection would have shown her that such a thing was an impossibility. Had Lavinia taken the step, it was hardly probable that Don

Antonio could have known of it, or knowing it, would have spoken so calmly of a catastrophe more terrible in the Princess's eyes than Lavinia's death, and shameful beyond measure.

'Eccellenza, calm yourself,' said Don Antonio hastily, 'I did not mean to say that! No legal steps have as yet been taken by Don Uberto. I was reasoning from a strictly canonical point of view. I consider them married, because the Council of Trent——'

'The Council of Trent! — Dio buono! and you thought that your Council of Trent authorised you to give me such a fright?' She began to fan herself. Great beads of perspiration stood upon her brow, testifying to her momentary anguish. 'I am tired of hearing you quote your Council of Trent!' she exclaimed with exasperation.

'It is only the second time I have done so,' pleaded the chaplain, 'and I beg your Excellency to excuse me if I seem to be repeating myself. The fact is, that all our laws on the Sacrament of Matrimony date from that Council, and it is said that its labours in that particular section surpassed those of any other session, and were never excelled by any other Council. It is extremely difficult, therefore, when discussing the laws of the Church on such matters, to avoid quoting their origin and the Decrees from which they emanated. Now, my aforesaid Council considers that when two young people, free to choose their state, and having solemnly promised marriage to each other, desire ardently to receive the priest's blessing, there is no reason why they should not consider themselves as already united, inasmuch that the priest who celebrates a marriage, simply ratifies a previously existing contract between the young couple. He cannot refuse this ratification when it is requested by the contracting parties in the presence of the required witnesses, and it is not even necessary that they should

have attained majority according to the civil law, the canonical age being sufficient ——'

Princess Astalli had listened to this last explanation with unusual attention, and not a little uneasiness, but a moment's reflection persuaded her that her fears were only an inspiration of the evil spirit.

'I cannot believe that such poisonous doctrines are common amongst our Roman clergy,' she said aloud. 'I will consult the prelates and cardinals of my acquaintance and let you know if they interpret the Decrees of the Council of Trent as literally as you do, and send you to them that they may reform your opinion. In the meantime, as I asked you once before not to explain these same decrees to Don Uberto Casale, I now beg you not to give my daughters the benefit of your enlightened interpretation.'

'I shall be most happy to learn that your Excellency has gone for fuller information to more competent authorities in such matters,' replied Don Antonio. 'I have only told you what I thought absolutely necessary that you should know, but more able and enlightened ministers of God will complete the scant information I have conveyed to you, with a number of even more literal truths regarding Church law, with which I dared not scandalise your Excellency.' And with this parting shaft he withdrew.

CHAPTER XVIII

On the morning chosen by the Princess Astalli for her definite interview with Lavinia, which had ended in her daughters' spirited revolt, the Tiber rowing club was unusually crowded at an early hour. There had been a heavy shower during the night, which had refreshed the sultry summer atmosphere, had washed the dust from the river's green banks, and had silenced, for a few hours, the deafening monotonous song of the locusts. It was one of those rains which delight the heart of the wan and fainting Roman, who has to trudge on his way through months of cloudless sky, with the thermometer at thirty degrees centigrade; but which spread fear and dismay among the mountaineers who have left their healthy hilly homes, driven by starvation, to come down into the Roman Campagna as field-labourers, to gather in the old crops of wheat and maize, to plough the earth and sow the new seed, and who, after one of those dreaded summer showers, fall stricken by hundreds in their encampments with malarious fever, and are carried in ambulances to the hospitals of Rome.

The young Romans flocked to the club-house that morning in unusual numbers, and pulled away before sunrise; others sauntered in later in continual succession. There was an incessant trampling of feet on the floor above, of loud talking and laughter from those who were putting on their flannels, and those who had got in from their early pull. Below, on the verandah, the men lay stretched to their full length on cane lounges and easy-chairs, reading the morning papers and discussing

the politics of the day. Tubs, wherries, and shells of all sizes were moored to the platform, like ducklings swimming about a gigantic duck. Some of the boatmen were busy about their work, while others sat armed with landing nets in the boat furthest upstream, eating their morning meal of raw onions and dry bread, and watching the flowing waters with experienced eyes. They believe that nothing which floats down the river is valueless, and are ever ready to seize what the tide brings past them, even while seeming occupied with other things. Casale had been one of the first to appear at break of day, and now, like the others, was taking his ease on the verandah, listening to the futile chatter. Suddenly there was a noise amidst the boatmen below, and several of the men who were idling over frozen coffee and iced drinks, moved to the railing to see what the disturbance was about.

The man seated in the last boat upstream, held a long-handled landing net, and amidst the shouts and encouraging cheers of his mates, was trying to fish up a little object that was floating towards him. When he lifted the net from the water, dripping and limp, there was something in it. The crowd at once gathered at that end of the platform. The boatman had caught a little velvet box which had once been red, but was now almost black. One of the members who stood near the railing of the verandah jumped into a boat below, and climbing over the others until he reached the last, took the box out of the hands of the boatman, who seemed too surprised to know what to do with it himself. He opened it and uttered an exclamation on seeing that it contained a turquoise ring, and a bit of purple blotted paper, neatly folded in the lid.

'Look here!' he said, as he reached the platform again, 'there is a ring in this box, and a letter to tell us to whom it belongs! Per Bacco! We are to be initiated into

some tragic love affair — what fun!' He began to unfold the limp, blurred, water-stained paper with great care, for fear of tearing it. 'The handwriting is a good deal blotted,' he observed, 'but there is enough left of it to tell us what we want to know.'

Just then Casale stretched his broad brown hand over the shoulders of the bystanders, seized the paper and the little box, and put both in his pocket.

'These objects belong to a friend of mine, and I will return them to their owner,' he said coldly, in answer to the many surprised inquiring glances that were turned upon him.

He was deathly pale, and evidently trying to master some inexplicable emotion. But the man from whose hands he had wrenched the box and the letter, flushed red and then almost purple with rage.

'Villano!' he cried in a stentorian voice, moving straight towards Casale, 'do you think I will suffer you to insult me because you are a patrician and I am a plebeian?'

He raised his arm to strike Casale, but a crowd of men surrounded him immediately and held him back, remonstrating violently and all talking at once, as Italians do, knowing the while that no one is heeding them. Casale, with a cold contemptuous expression in his haughty face, watched the scene from where he stood. He took out the little damp objects which had caused the uproar, returned the blurred letter to its place over the ring, and restored the jewel-case to his pocket. Buttoning his jacket over his broad chest, he pushed aside the crowd which surrounded the infuriated man, and stood before him.

'If I took that letter and the ring from you it was because I had a right to do so, and I am not in the habit of explaining the motives of my actions to any one — much less to you.'

As he spoke, his hand touched his chest with a proud gesture, as though daring any one to dispute his right of possession to whatsoever might be there.

Signor Ferri, his antagonist, made a passionate movement forward, as if to attack Casale, but again a dozen arms were raised to prevent him.

Several of Casale's friends — men of his own class — were amongst those who were trying to avert a quarrel. They knew something of the sad circumstances which had followed his engagement to the beautiful girl who lived in the old palace on the Tiber beyond the club-house, and they almost guessed the truth with regard to the ownership of the ring. But the club was composed of heterogeneous elements and based on democratic principles, and a great number of its members had never heard of Donna Lavinia's existence.

Any man belonging to the respectable classes — nobleman, plebeian, or merchant — was eligible, and social distinctions vanished at the touch of the oar, to return the moment the sculls were laid aside; and the men of different classes instinctively gathered in separate groups.

Had one of those of Casale's set been in the place of Signor Agostino Ferri, it is more than probable that instead of resenting Don Uberto's rather energetic and imprudent interposition, he would have guessed that there still existed a secret understanding between the lovers, which the indiscreet waters of the Tiber had revealed; and he would have sought to pass over the whole matter with a jest, for fear of compromising the young lady concerned.

But Signor Ferri was a somewhat vulgar personage, who knew nothing of the ways of polite society and still less of Don Uberto Casale's doings, and the latter's interference seemed to him an impertinence and an insult. He was hot-tempered and brave, like most men of his station, and at once resented what he took for the patrician's contempt.

'I say — do be quiet, Ferri,' whispered into his ear a little man with a huge mustache, which he carefully encouraged, believing that it made him look like King Humbert. 'Do you not understand that Casale recognised the ring, and to shield a lady's reputation snatched away the letter to prevent your reading it? Every fellow of his set in the club will tell you he could not do otherwise!'

'If Casale wishes to guard his mistress's good name,' screamed Ferri, so as to be heard by all the men around him, 'he can do so in some other way than by treating me like a dog——'

'As you deserve!'

At the same instant, and without the slightest hesitation, Uberto dealt him a heavy blow on the mouth.

Then followed a scene of indescribable confusion. It took ten men to hold Ferri, who raged, yelled, and kicked like a madman in his attempts to be free and get at Casale, who stood leaning against the railing, with folded arms, surrounded by his particular friends.

He was so tortured in mind by the harrowing doubts as to how that little jewel-case had found its way into the river, that he ceased to heed what was said by those around him. Something dreadful must have happened in Casa Astalli to induce Lavinia to part with her ring. Was she drowned? Would some fisherman find her body as the boatman had caught the ring? He fancied he saw her floating down the stream, her heavy locks wrapped closely round her white body like a black shroud, her hands clasped over her breast holding the little box, which had only escaped her grasp in the last icy convulsion of her death. She would be even more beautiful than in life, with the dark shadow of her silky lashes covering those great loving eyes, which he was never to see again——

'Of course you would rather have it over, and be done

with this affair as soon as possible, and — Good Heavens, Casale! what is the matter with you?' cried his friend, who for the last five minutes had been giving him the benefit of his knowledge about duelling, and offering him his services. 'To see your face, amico mio, one would think — one might think ——'

'That I have many serious preoccupations besides this idiotic affair,' replied Casale coldly, lifting his eyes and looking his friend in the face, while he wiped the perspiration from his brow.

'Please see to it at once — you and Davalos,' he continued, putting his hand on the shoulder of another man who stood near to him; 'and when it is all settled meet me in my rooms; I will wait for you there.'

He looked about as if uncertain what to do, then turned suddenly towards them. 'Addio,' he said hurriedly, shaking hands with both, 'and grazie!'

But instead of crossing the little bridge and going towards the city to attend to the many preoccupations which his friends thought weighed so heavily on his mind, Casale, to their surprise, jumped into one of the boats and pulled away up the river.

In front of the terrace of the Palazzo Astalli he paused, and began to study each minute detail of the dark old building and its surroundings. Nothing unusual seemed to have taken place there. The shutters were closed to keep out the sun, the great brown awnings, embroidered with white braids, moved gently in the summer breeze before the drawing-room doors and windows. The wicker-chairs in the Belvedere, where he had last seen Lavinia, stood in disorder as if just abandoned by their occupants. Surely, he thought, if some horrible accident had happened to one of the inmates of the palace the inaminate things could not have looked so indifferent! Even they would have taken some part in the universal grief.

But the thought did not comfort him nor dispel his sad

forebodings; and he was just on the point of turning down stream when the firing of the gun on Hadrian's tomb told him that it was noon.

Casale at once turned his boat and rowed to the middle of the stream so as to be in sight of the long line of windows belonging to the main building, which were somewhat hidden by the terrace. He hastily tied his jacket to the end of one of his oars, held it up, and waved it several times to and fro, allowing the boat to float down the current until it passed under one of the massive arches of the bridge.

If nothing had happened to Lavinia, he thought, she would surely have understood that he had used his jacket as a substitute for the flag he usually carried, and when they met at dawn on the terrace she would explain to him by what inconceivable chain of events the ring had left her hands, and he would tell her how it had found its way into his. But he could not think without a shudder of those dreaded sixteen hours of suspense and harrowing doubt through which he would have to live somehow, before seeing her.

He landed at the club, but scarcely casting a glance at the men who were still standing in groups on the verandah, and who became silent on his approach, he made straight for his dressing-room, changed his clothes, and walked home to wait for his seconds.

A new strain of vexatious thoughts, however, overtook him there. In his sudden anguish about Lavinia, he had forgotten Ferri's scathing insult and vile insinuation. But now the memory of the whole scene returned forcibly, and again fired his blood. An indescribable sense of disgust and repugnance came over him at the idea of doing such a contemptible brute the honour of crossing swords with him instead of thrashing him as he deserved. The man was not a gentleman and it was hateful to have to treat him as one. No woman's name

had been mentioned, to be sure, but from what had been whispered to Ferri by Guido Segni, and by many others who were standing about Ferri at the time, Uberto realised with dismay that they had all concluded as a matter of course that the ring must have come from the Palazzo Astalli. What had been only whispered in the morning would be freely spoken of all over Rome before night, and Donna Lavinia degli Astalli's name fatally dragged into the quarrel. Casale tortured himself by going over all the absurdities that would be invented and believed about the affair. His blood burned in his face and his head swam at the thought of compromising a young girl, no matter who she might be, by a duel. He felt this almost more than the new difficulties the encounter would raise in his way. Had he only quarrelled with a gentleman it would have been different. To save a lady, and one of Lavinia's position especially, he believed that matters could have been smoothed over. But then, a gentleman would not have spoken as Ferri had done. Casale believed that Ferri knew as much of his affairs as the other men — but in this he did him an injustice — and he, Casale, would not have had to close his mouth in such a particularly forcible manner. The fates were against him, he concluded, and it was useless to go on conjecturing possibilities; the only too real fact was, that this duel would prove to be the most insurmountable of all difficulties to Lavinia's parents, even if he came out of it safely.

His seconds were announced, and they told him that the preliminaries of the duel had been arranged with all possible correctness. They informed him that Signor Ferri had chosen to fight with swords — to which they had agreed — that the duel was to take place on the following morning at seven o'clock at the Villa Lazzaroni, situated some two miles out of the Porta San Giovanni, and that they would call for Casale with the surgeon at half-past six.

Casale listened and acquiesced by a cold and absent silence to everything except this last arrangement, against which, to their surprise, he raised several rather futile objections. He concluded by saying that instead of coming to the Palazzo Casale, they were to wait for him at the Porta San Giovanni, where he would join them at the appointed time.

The hours of the night weighed heavily on Casale, but the excitement which it would have been natural for him to experience on the eve of such a serious encounter, was entirely mastered by his anxiety as to Lavinia's fate.

He found it almost impossible to be calm and look his position quietly in the face. One thought reigned supreme in his brain and reduced all other considerations to insignificance.

He sat down at his desk and began writing; but scarcely had he traced a few words when, throwing the pen away from him, he rose and began to pace the room again. Why should he care what became of his money when he was dead?

There was a slight sound in the stillness of the night, as of one listening at the door, then a knock, and his brother Ferdinando stood before him.

It was evident that he had been informed of the altercation at the club, and had come at this unusual hour to speak to his brother about it. Uberto knew exactly what would be said to him, and frowned at the unwelcome intrusion. He tried to conquer his impatience and stood waiting for the Marchese Casale to speak.

'You are going to fight to-morrow, I hear,' he said, looking up into his younger brother's face with a scandalised expression.

'Well! what of that?' asked Uberto.

'Caro Uberto, we are deeply grieved about it. Really, we all feel that another duel is too much for the dignity of our family. You know how dreadfully mortified we

were after that other affair in Bologna; and now you are going to subject us to something still worse in Rome.'

Uberto laughed.

'It is a cowardly brutal iniquity to fight thus in cold blood, Uberto,' remonstrated Ferdinando, 'and you run the risk not only of losing your soul, but of disgracing our name. It is not too late yet to arrange this affair, I hope! Could we not put a stop to it?'

'Impossible!' exclaimed Uberto, again laughing, but this time not quite so naturally. He was impressed by the amount of affection for him conveyed in his brother's last speech, and he showed it.

'Your name, which preoccupies you so much, will be infinitely more disgraced if I do not fight than if I do. And as for my soul — so dear to you — I quite agree that duelling is a brutal infamous iniquity, and that it takes more courage to refuse than to fight. But there does not happen to be any other way of defending one's honour. Our religion allows us to defend our lives even at the risk of another's; my honour is more sacred to me than my life, and if I defend it at the price of my life, I trust God will forgive me.'

'But it is considered a great sin,' said Ferdinando.

'I know it,' answered Uberto sadly. He was thinking how frightful it would appear to Lavinia.

'But caro Uberto ——' began Ferdinando.

'Oh, enough!' exclaimed Uberto angrily. 'You know perfectly well that I must either fight or die morally in my own town, in my own country, and to all my friends. I have no choice. Let us shake hands, Ferdinando,' he added, going up to his nervous, pale-faced brother. 'And now leave me to myself. You have not behaved over-generously to me about our father's will, for he confided his intentions to you and you disregarded them. Be that as it may, I forgive you now.'

Ferdinando stood grasping Uberto's hand very tightly.

His face twitched nervously and he seemed on the point of saying something painful and hard to put into words. Uberto watched the workings of his face, which he read perfectly, with a cold scrutinising eye. He had never loved his brother, and he had never stooped to the worldly little family hypocrisies whereby many affect a solidarity of affection which has in fact rarely existed between eldest sons and their younger brothers.

Whatever generous impulse had stirred Ferdinando's soul for one instant, was swept away by a second and perhaps more worldly-wise thought. And the words he was about to speak were never uttered.

'Let us pray that you may come back safe and sound,' he said with just a shadow of embarrassment, 'and continue to make a large fortune for yourself.'

Uberto thought that the fear lest he should not be killed on the following morning, but might live to ask an account of the night's impulsive confession, had sealed Ferdinando's lips at the last. When he had left the room, Uberto sat down at his table and made a will, leaving his small fortune to Donna Bianca degli Astalli, that she might found a home for poor women in the town of Vallinfreda to be kept by the Sisters of Charity.

He smiled a sad grave smile as he wrote his signature. He wondered which was to win — the Barberine or the Sisters. Ferdinando at least should not touch a penny of his money.

CHAPTER XIX

LAVINIA had been very miserable that day. Her mother's despotism had forced her to rebel, and she bewailed her seeming disrespect as if it were a true calamity. Her little sister would soon be taken from her, and she had parted with her ring and Uberto's precious letter.

Her tears flowed incessantly all the morning, and when the time came to watch from behind her shutters for Uberto's signal, her vision was so blurred and her eyes so painful that she could scarcely look at the bright water. The sight of the little boat, which she had hardly expected to see on such a sad day, dried her tears at once and she even noted the steady persistent way in which Uberto examined each window. Then the spreading of his jacket over the oar and his waving of it, seemed rather extraordinary, but she soon understood the action and interpreted it rightly. Something there was, however, which dampened her expectancy; an unforeseen obstacle, on which she had not counted while confiding her secret to Bianca. And this was her little sister's violent opposition to any more such meetings.

Bianca was sincerely convinced that Lavinia was committing a crime in being alone with Uberto, and she had told her that she meant to prevent it at the risk of her own life.

Lavinia's love had developed her womanly instincts, clearing away many of the artificial feelings that had been taught her, though she could not have explained to others how the change had taken place. Nor could she have made plain the point at which she thought that evil

began, or in what it consisted, though she was dimly conscious of its hidden existence in the world.

With Bianca it was not so. Whatever intuition of love had arisen in her, as if reflected from Lavinia's, was of a morbid and unreal nature. Feeding constantly on her own secret imaginings, in her ignorance of life and its realities, she had created monstrous phantoms out of the uncertain suggestions of her sensitive mind, and saw nothing but sin and temptation in the simple expression of the most natural of human passions.

Long before day Lavinia crept out of bed, and with infinite precautions managed to get into her clothes in the dark. On tip-toe she passed through her open door into the hall behind their rooms, and once beyond which she would be out of Bianca's hearing.

It was large and empty, save for the high wooden presses which lined the walls, and she ran little risk of making a noise, though for prudence sake she took off her little slippers, as before, tucked them under her arm, and proceeded carefully, holding her hands out before her to discover any unseen impediment. When she touched the door at last, she heaved a sigh of relief, but just as she believed herself at the end of her anxieties, an unexpected difficulty froze the blood in her veins. The door was locked. She tried gently to force the handle. It turned easily, but the door remained closed; then she put her shoulder to the massive woodwork and pushed until it groaned. But it was too solid for her slender weight to move.

She had really made very little noise in her attempt to force open the door, but that was sufficient to wake the suspicious sister. In an instant Bianca was out of bed and in the hall, her long white night-gown trailing behind her, and her little bare feet treading the uneven brick floor.

'Lavinia, where are you going?' she whispered.

Lavinia started violently, and her slippers fell from under her arm, frightening both the girls with the noise they made as the solid little heels struck the stone floor of the vaulted room, where every sound echoed even more loudly and strangely in the stillness of dawn.

'Did you lock this door?' asked Lavinia hurriedly, in a voice which trembled more with anger than with fear.

'Do not be angry with me,' said Bianca, drawing nearer and speaking in still lower tones. 'Ever since the day you committed that imprudence I have locked the door at night, to keep you from doing so again.'

'Who authorised you to spy on my actions?' retorted Lavinia with growing wrath.

'I did it for your good, sister,' said Bianca meekly, laying her hand on Lavinia's arm, and then gently trying to draw her away.

'Open the door instantly!' cried Lavinia, shaking her off.

'Oh, do not speak to me so! it breaks my heart,' sobbed Bianca. 'It is for your good, Lavinia, dear. What you are bent on doing is wrong, a very great wrong, and it is my duty to prevent it.'

'What wrong can it be for me to see Uberto for a few moments to-day, when I was allowed to be with him for hours a few months ago? I tell you, Bianca, I must and I will see him, and speak to him now. Open the door, or give me the key.'

'I cannot, I cannot!' groaned Bianca, wringing her hands. 'I beseech you, Lavinia, listen to me. Be good. Make this sacrifice.'

'Not I!' exclaimed Lavinia. 'Why should I make a sacrifice that is not going to benefit any one? I am no Bible heroine, and I do not mean to sacrifice my only joy to imaginary duties. Open the door, I tell you!'

'No, no!' cried Bianca passionately. 'I will not give you the key, and if you go on frightening me in this

way, I will just go and call Mademoiselle Gilberte, and she may wake up the whole house if she chooses!'

'Cruel, cruel Bianca! Do you not understand, child, that if Uberto does not find me where he expected, he will be so anxious that he will give the alarm himself by rushing all over the house? And suppose some of the early risers meet him wandering about the halls and passages, what would they say? Sù via! Bianca, let me go. I tell you it is by far the safest thing to do.'

Bianca was persuaded at once that what Lavinia said was only too true. There would be a fearful scandal if one of the servants saw Uberto, and she must see to that also, but not by doing as Lavinia bade her. She turned and groped her way back to her own room, hoping that some inspiration would come to her. She was too chilled to remain thus in her night-dress and bare feet any longer, and she would gain time by slipping on her clothes at once. A faint glimmer of the first light of day was softly creeping through her half-opened blinds. She turned her head to see if Lavinia had followed her, but she saw nothing. She had evidently remained at the door waiting for her to return with the key.

Then Bianca knew what to do. She ran into Lavinia's room and locked the outer door through which the latter had escaped, quickly returned to her own, hid the key in a work-basket near at hand, and hastily began to dress. Presently Lavinia emerged from the darkness and stood on the threshold. She was rather surprised at seeing that Bianca gave no signs of relenting, and her temper again began to rise.

'Where is the key?' she whispered. 'I have been waiting for it out there in the dark these ten minutes!'

Bianca put her finger on her lips, and pointed to where Mademoiselle Gilberte slept, then leading the way, she motioned to Lavinia to follow her into her room. When they were both within the doorway, Bianca pushed her sister towards a chair.

'Sit down,' she said, and Lavinia reluctantly obeyed with a sigh, secretly hoping to obtain by her compliance what Bianca had refused to her imperious demands.

Bianca hesitated a moment, as if about to speak, then turned and fled through the open door, closing and locking it after her, and leaving Lavinia a prisoner in her own room.

Uberto had tried to get a few hours' rest after Ferdinando's visit on the previous night, knowing how necessary it was to steady his hand and clear his brain before the coming encounter, but finding that the stillness and darkness of his room only increased his feverish fancies about Lavinia, he rose, and long before day was on his way to the Via Giulia. He walked down the dark steep Vicolo, examined the high wall of the palace and the little green door, and went on some five or six yards to the corner of the house by the water's edge. Here there was a small deposit of sand left by the river when high, now sufficiently dried by the hot July sun to allow him to stand on it and walk under the curved iron balcony of the Belvedere. Having made his inspection, he turned carefully about on the oozy sandbank that slipped into the river here and there as he stepped on it, and went back to the corner of the narrow street. Hidden by the angle of the wall he peeped out from time to time to see whether Angelo were coming.

Soon the sound of the old gardener's heavy steps echoed through the street, ceasing now and then suddenly, as he stopped and turned sharply about to see if he was followed. He no longer trod on his way carelessly and unpreoccupied, as he had done for years. There was treason in the air, he said to himself, and every sound, or the appearance of a human shadow at the head of the Vicolo, awakened his suspicions and made him increase his precautions.

Uberto saw him draw the colossal key out of his

pocket and put it into the lock, still looking back, in the direction whence he had come, and consequently away from Uberto. As the door turned on its hinges Angelo withdrew the key, and Uberto knew that his chance must be now or never, as the lock closed with a spring.

Just as Angelo disappeared, Casale with one bound was there, and thrusting his shoulder and knee through the opening, tried to push the door back.

Angelo knew at once to whom the arm belonged, and while striving with all his might to keep the intruder out, he wondered if the rascal had dropped from the clouds or risen out of the earth for the express purpose of tormenting him.

But Casale was too much for him. First one shoulder and then the other widened the opening, and as the old man made his last desperate effort to resist, Uberto freed himself entirely, and the obstacle being withdrawn, the weight of Angelo's body fell against the door and closed it with a resounding crash, that echoed up the narrow stairs and through the deserted street.

'Let me in, Angelo!' said Uberto, turning on him, half laughing, half serious. A dim light entered through the square iron grating above, and on perceiving Casale's mischievous expression, the old man waxed very angry.

'What manner is this, Signorino?' he cried; 'first you get in by force, and then ask me to allow you to enter!'

'That is how I do, Angelo, when I mean to have my way about anything,' answered Uberto, laughing outright. 'So now that it cannot be helped, you will please not make any more disturbance about it, and let me say two words to Donna Lavinia — I will not be five minutes.'

And before he had completed his sentence he was half way up the steps and beyond hearing Angelo's remonstrances. Nevertheless the old man shook his head and muttered a few words.

'Signorino mio, where are you going? for charity's sake, do stop.'

Bianca stood trembling at the head of the stairs, listening to the few short sentences exchanged between Uberto and the gardener, and with a sinking, troubled heart awaited his coming.

Uberto sprang forward and was about to clasp the ethereal white-robed little maiden to his breast when he discovered that she was not Lavinia.

His agonised fears of a few hours ago rushed upon him again, and he stood speechless, falling back to the wall, his face the colour of ashes.

Bianca did not understand the eager searching look in his eyes, and only silently wondered at his extraordinary emotion.

'Where is Lavinia?' he gasped at last.

'Locked up in her room,' answered Bianca quickly, guessing that he feared she was ill. 'She is quite well, but I prevented her from coming here to meet you. Now Uberto, you must go away immediately. I only came to save my sister's honour, but were I seen here with you, mine would be lost. So please go away as quickly as possible!'

Angelo by this time had reached the last turning of the stairs, and was almost as surprised as Casale had been on seeing Bianca standing there instead of Lavinia. He had heard her last words, and believing in her powers of persuasion more than in his own, he left her to get rid of the intruder and went about his work.

'You might have brought her with you,' said Uberto reproachfully, slipping out of the narrow landing into the Belvedere, and turning to face Bianca. 'Your presence would have been a protection to her, since you think that necessary,' he added bitterly.

For one moment both were silent.

'I must see Lavinia. I have something of the utmost

and most pressing importance to say to her. Please, Bianca, go and fetch her at once.'

'Your pleading is useless, my dear Uberto. I resisted hers, as well as her threats and tears. Lavinia shall never again meet you secretly here. Do you not know that a girl who is found alone with a man is dishonoured? It is my duty to protect her against you, as I would against any other danger. I only came to bid you go away at once, and because she was afraid that you might commit some imprudence by searching for her. Now please go away.'

Bianca folded her hands beseechingly, but Casale did not see her. This new difficulty, arising from a quarter whence he least expected it, at a moment when he was about to risk his life and longed more passionately than ever to see Lavinia, exasperated him beyond endurance.

'You have joined our enemies, and become one of them, Bianca,' he said angrily; 'who would have believed it of you?'

Bianca protested indignantly.

'You know perfectly well that I have always sustained Lavinia in her battles, and wished to see her bravely true to you,' she replied reproachfully, 'because I believe that it is her duty to be faithful to you, to resist all pressure from without, and to perfer eternal maidenhood or seclusion rather than marry any other man ——'

'Well?' inquired Uberto.

'But I approve of your love and constancy at a safe distance from each other, until our parents' consent has been granted,' added Bianca. 'I will have no more of these romantic meetings, which keep Lavinia for days in a state of excitement, ecstasy, and rashness bordering on absolute folly.'

Bianca related her sister's shortcomings in a woe-begone pitiful voice, as if she were narrating some frightful disaster; and Uberto listened with sparkling eyes, his face lighted up by his brightest smile.

'My brave darling!' he murmured. 'I forgive you a good deal, Bianca,' he said aloud, 'for you have made me happy by telling me how much Lavinia loves me!'

Bianca looked surprised. She did not quite see what it was in her sad complaint that had made him happy, but at any rate his black looks were momentarily gone, and she profited by the occasion.

'Now, dear Uberto, please go.'

'How came this to be floating in the Tiber?' he asked, not heeding her request, and producing the pitiful, besmeared, unglued little jewel-box, which was almost shapeless after its bath and a night's drying.

'How came it in your hands rather?' cried Bianca aghast. 'Lavinia threw it from here into the middle of the river, right over mamma's head — oh, Uberto! it was so dreadful of her! — rather than let her have it.'

Uberto related how a boatman had fished it out of the current.

'What is this curious little violet paper?' inquired Bianca, trying to take it out of his hands.

'Oh, never mind that!' answered Uberto hastily, putting it into his pocket.

'But how came you by it, Uberto?' she continued, her curiosity making her forget to tell him to go away just then.

'The caprices of fate are boundless, and ever new, my dear little saint,' said Uberto. 'I happened to be at the club when the little box was opened by one of the men, I recognised it at once, and took it. You see how simple it was, and how natural after all.'

Seeing her so intensely interested, Uberto thought it was his time to profit by the occasion.

'This ring was sent to me in that marvellous way,' he said very gravely, 'that I might return it to Lavinia at once. That is why I came this morning. It is a warning of Providence, Bianca, you must not disregard it.'

'I will give Lavinia the ring,' she said quickly, her manner changing at once from the familiar to the defensive, 'and tell her all about its strange adventures.'

'Bianca — I must see Lavinia to-day, and give her this box myself,' he said emphatically. 'My reasons are so imperative, that I implore you for the sake of the future happiness of the one we both love so dearly to let me speak to her. It may be that you will never forgive yourself for refusing me this one favour.'

Bianca shook her head and pointed to the door.

Just then Angelo drew near with a pail of water.

'Hurry, Signorini, it is getting late, the sun will soon be peeping over the Palazzo into my garden, and with it all the household! Who says we shall be so lucky as to escape a "finibus mundi" a second time? Be reasonable, Signorino, come with me.' He put down his bucket, drew out his great key, and began to descend the first steps as though to lead Uberto out of the door below.

Uberto looked at his watch and started. The old man's interference had recalled the realities that awaited him beyond the Porta San Giovanni. Angelo was right, time was flying swiftly, and nothing but death could prevent that fatal appointment.

He took Bianca by the hand and gently drew her far enough away to be out of Angelo's hearing.

'Listen to me, Bianca, your stubbornness forces me to have recourse to a means of persuasion I would give anything not to use! But it is my last chance, and I hope it will bend your heartless will.'

He hesitated for some moments. 'Something very unfortunate has occurred. I have had a quarrel with a man, and we are to settle it this morning. My moments are counted, and in the face of the many possibilities which may follow, you cannot be so heartless as to send me away without a last word with Lavinia.'

'Uberto, Uberto!' cried Bianca wildly, her face as

white as death, and her frail little body trembling. 'You are not going to fight a duel? It cannot be — must not be. It would break Lavinia's heart to know that you could commit such a mortal sin, and perhaps die excommunicated. Oh, God! what greater misfortune than this could befall us?'

The poor child felt the ground failing under her feet, and fearing to fall she sank against an orange tree.

In her cheerless life her religion had been her one all-absorbing intense preoccupation. She knew the Church's uniform condemnation of duelling, and in her spotless life she considered that there was but one truly great, irretrievable misery — to offend God and to die without having had time to repent, to confess, and to receive absolution. It was this fate which probably awaited Uberto, the only person besides Lavinia whom she really loved with an unconventional, human, natural affection.

'Tell me, Uberto,' she faltered, almost too breathless to make herself heard, 'if I let you see Lavinia, will you promise me you will not fight this duel?'

'Not to fight means dishonour, Bianca. Surely you could not ask that of me?' he replied.

'One should bear any disgrace, incur every shame, suffer every human misery, rather than offend God, Uberto,' she cried. 'You are a Christian, do not be led by worldly considerations into doing this evil deed!' She held up her clasped hands to him imploringly. 'I will go for Lavinia at once, and when you see her you will not have the heart to leave her to fight this horrible duel! You will stay by her side, will you not, Uberto? She loves you so dearly! Ah! only promise me you will not fight, and God will forgive me for bringing her here to meet you!'

A sudden excitement had succeeded the first moment of surprise, and she now pleaded for Uberto's life as if it were her own.

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'Could Lavinia bear to see me dishonoured? An outcast of society, a man without friends, from whom all would turn with disgust? Is not my honour as dear to her as it is to me?' Uberto continued to argue, still hoping to persuade her. 'In the face of the inevitable, Bianca, you must submit. Do you not know, child, that the laws of society are none the less inflexible because they are senseless and evil?'

'Lavinia would cease to love you, Uberto,' cried Bianca, 'if she knew you were going to fight a duel! What do we care for what the wicked people of the world think? She despises them as I do, and would despise you for obeying their iniquitous laws!'

Uberto began to realise his folly in having told her of the duel. He repented bitterly now, but it was too late. This grief seemed almost too heavy for her delicate sensitive nature. Her sorrow touched his heart, and his eyes were moist with pity as he looked down at her pale face. Neither spoke. Uberto stood, watch in hand, anxiously waiting to hear her verdict. She had it in her power to grant him the one last joy of his life, and she refused it. Neither prayers nor supplications seemed to move her, though still he waited and hoped.

Far beyond the city and the Campagna the summer sun was rising majestically, spreading his beneficent warmth over the Alban hills, gilding the grapes in the vineyards, and tingeing with silver the leaves of the melancholy olive trees — saddest of nature's offspring — and at last his rays were creeping over the roof of the palace, beginning to tip with gold the tops of the luxuriant trees on the terrace, and slowly stealing down upon the flower-beds and the creeping plants beneath. But Bianca was unconscious of the morning sun, and did not heed the calls of the little birds she fed with grain each day. Her heart was heavy with a grief such as she had never known, and the burning tears which flowed

so fast, blinded her and hid all outward objects from her sight.

'Bianca!' cried Uberto despairingly, 'will you not relent? Be merciful — be kind! I have but five minutes left! have pity on my agony!'

Bianca sobbed aloud, but did not move.

It was too late now. He had barely time to reach the gate of the city at the appointed hour. Luckily he had ordered his brougham to wait for him in the Piazza Farnese. But he must go without seeing Lavinia.

He could not blame Bianca; she was doing what her narrow inexperienced conscience told her to do. With a great effort he mastered himself.

'Give her this,' he said, handing Bianca the ring, 'and tell her to wear it for my sake.'

He turned to go, and then looked back at her.

'You will repent bitterly of what you have done, Bianca, before another hour is passed. Remember my words; I do not forgive you.'

He motioned to Angelo that he was coming, and made as if to follow the gardener.

'Angelo, wait a moment!' cried Bianca, as if suddenly awakened. She staggered to her feet, and managed to reach Angelo before Uberto could.

She snatched the key from the gardener's hand, and hid it on her person.

'Now you cannot go!' she cried exultingly, as she turned and faced Casale.

'Good God, Bianca! Are you mad?' He breathed hard in terrible agitation. Time was pressing, and he could not stop to explain to her the frightful consequences of her action. She was too utterly ignorant of all the ways of the world even to believe what he might say. She thought she was saving his soul, and no earthly consideration could outweigh that.

'Angelo, let me out instantly!' exclaimed Uberto, turning to the gardener. Instead of obeying, Angelo

looked at Bianca, who stood with folded arms, waiting to see the result of her masterly stroke of policy.

'Signorini miei! what does all this mean? First the Signorina Padroncina wanted Don Uberto to go, and he would not. Now he wants to be off, and she will not hear of it. I cannot explain it to myself.' The old man was in great perplexity.

'Let me out, man! I command you. If you care for your life you will obey at once!' Uberto took him by the collar and shook him violently.

'But, Signore,' answered Angelo, frightened almost out of his senses by Casale's words and manner, 'there is no door but this, unless you go through the apartment, and out by the front door on the Via Giulia.'

Casale was fairly caged, and he began to chafe like a wild beast as he looked about him for a means of escape.

'Bianca! for God's sake let me go!' he cried to her with a last despairing attempt to make her yield.

But Bianca shook her head. She believed that if she could only keep him until the hour of the duel was past, his seconds would be obliged to arrange the matter somehow, and the encounter would never take place.

Uberto read her thoughts in her face. He bit his hands in his impotent rage, and strode up and down the Belvedere, muttering curses. He looked over the wall of the terrace into the Vicolo, many yards below. It was a tall straight mass of masonry, and it would have been madness to think of escaping at that point. He crossed the Belvedere to the iron balcony which hung over the Tiber. The drop to the water was even longer than the jump to the street, and he was about to turn away with another oath when he suddenly changed his mind, sprang over the iron railing, and let himself slide down from the wall to a slender willow tree that grew out between the rocks beneath the balcony.

'Stop! stop!' cried Angelo wildly, 'I will let you out!'

Bianca, terrified by horror and remorse, could neither speak nor move.

Uberto hesitated for an instant, but just then the measured rhythmical sound of many oars dipping in the water caught his experienced ear. One of the club boats was near at hand, hidden from view by the sudden bend of the river beyond the terrace, where the bank was low and overgrown with brushwood and tamarisks, and a few more strokes would bring the boat into full sight.

It would take him two minutes to clamber back to the railing, and he had scarcely one to spare, if he did not wish to be seen. The frightful construction that would be put upon the fact of his climbing up the Astalli terrace at that early hour — even the consequences of such a scandal — flashed through his mind at once.

He clutched at the long boughs of the little willow tree, and letting himself slide farther down, he swung his body as far out as was possible, sprang into the river, and disappeared in its muddy waters.

Bianca uttered one loud scream and clasped her hands wildly over her head as she rushed to the railing, only to see the cruel waters flow on, scarcely ruffled as they closed over Uberto's body. She saw him sink in the treacherous slime by the shore — saw his struggle to free himself from the river, that seemed to hold him down as a hideous monster might, tightening its grasp on his limbs, rolling over him, and at last taking his manly young body into its muddy depths.

It was she who had caused his death — she who had made Lavinia a widow before she was a bride — she who had sent him to that tribunal whence there is no appeal unprepared.

'God have mercy on his soul!' she sobbed, throwing back her head and looking up to Heaven.

The boat glided swiftly and silently forward, and the rowers heard Bianca's terrified cry, followed by the sound of a heavy body falling into the water.

Another vigorous stroke brought them abreast of the terrace just in time to see Bianca raise her head in prayer. A ray of the morning sun caught the golden cloud of her waving hair, throwing a halo round her pure and sorrowful face, while her beautiful white arms, scarcely veiled by the transparent floating sleeves of her summer gown, extended themselves like an angel's wings. For one moment the careless men who watched her from below, gazed up in almost reverential awe at the lovely vision.

CHAPTER XX

THE natural curiosity to know more about the mysterious tragedy which had been enacted on the terrace soon chased away the vision, and changed the angel into the person of Donna Bianca Astalli.

'What a romantic scene!' exclaimed the coxswain with a malicious smile. 'Who would have believed that the saintly daughter of Prince Astalli could be the heroine of such a mysterious intrigue!'

'Per Bacco!' cried one of the crew, 'we are so busy in watching Juliet that we forget all about Romeo. He may be drowning, for all we seem to care! Supposing we search for the poor devil?'

'It rather takes one's breath away,' observed Count Segni, as they pulled down the river. 'I can scarcely believe it is Donna Bianca.' He was a nephew of the Signora Camilla, and heard a great deal about Casa Astalli from her.

'There is no doubt about it,' replied the man who was steering, and who had had more leisure to recognise her.

'Was not she to have become a nun?' asked one. 'I thought she was called the Santarella di Casa Astalli. If she dismissed a lover at this hour of the morning, I should like to know at what hour she admitted him!'

'He is an awfully plucky fellow — whoever he be — at any rate,' observed another, 'to take that plunge so near the bank! By the bye,' he continued, looking about, 'I see no signs of Romeo.'

'Oh, by this time he is either drowned or safe ashore; one can land anywhere here, you know,' answered Segni composedly. 'I wonder if it could have been Casale?'

'Nonsense!' cried two or three voices.

'Casale is fighting his duel by this time,' said the man who was pulling stroke, 'and besides, Donna Lavinia would have been on the balcony were he the hero of this romance. Believe me, this is simply a very private little affair of the younger Princess. Perhaps she wished to have a taste of life before renouncing its vanities and follies for ever.'

'Well, to judge by appearances,' concluded the cox-swain, 'she has succeeded very well!'

Thus they chattered on idly, creating possibilities, drawing conclusions, and caring little for the reputations they were probably ruining, or for the suffering their idle words might some day cause.

Donna Bianca degli Astalli was not meant by temperament or the circumstances of her early life to bear worldly anxiety and care, nor the consequences of human passion and suffering, which are the common lot of man and woman in this world. She had led a life of penitence, self-sacrifice, and pious devotion. Of earthly interests, of human sympathies, of the moral sufferings or sins of others, she was utterly ignorant. Her one happiness had been to kneel at the foot of the altar, and pour out the overflowing fulness of her heart in prayer and self-abandonment. She had lived by the spirit only in meditation and concentrated religious thought. There was but barely enough of earthly substance about her to keep her soul in this world, and prevent it from taking its flight towards the great aim and end of all her aspirations. Up to the moment when the sweet melody of Lavinia's love had vibrated on the unknown chords of her own heart, her eyes had been constantly turned towards Heaven; and when for the space of an instant she had paused and turned them earthwards, it was in wonder that anything so harmonious could be found on this side of the grave.

And now her soul was tossing on the tempestuous sea of violent emotion, and she was made to taste at once of all the bitterness of life.

After seeing Uberto jump into the river and disappear, she sank almost inanimate upon the stone bench where Lavinia loved to sit and dream; and half stupidly she asked herself what was to happen next. Would they bring his body there, if he were drowned? And if he had gone to fight that duel, would he come back wounded and bleeding to upbraid her for her cruelty? He had said he would never forgive her. Would he curse her as he died? She closed her eyes, and had not strength to think further. When she opened them again, her thoughts returned, but dazed and unreal. She watched a little butterfly as it fluttered over the siringa bush in full bloom just by her. She listened to the blows dealt by the riveting machine upon the bolts of the iron bridge that was being built near the Ponte Rotto. She counted the regular strokes and wondered that the noise had never disturbed her before. Of the past and the present she had lost all memory.

Angelo stood watching her death-like face and her glassy vacant eyes. He saw that the emotion had been too great for her, and he even fancied that her sensitive mind had perhaps given way, and that he should soon see his little mistress taken to the Palazzina, the insane asylum, and locked up there as she had been in the Convent on the Quirinal Hill.

'Do not be so downcast, Signorina,' he said, trying to speak cheerfully. 'No doubt Don Uberto is quite safe by this time. Those young fellows who live in the water, think nothing of jumping off the Ponte Molle to take their morning bath. Bless you! they swim like fish, and could not drown themselves if they tried.'

'Oh, Angelo! do you really believe that Don Uberto is not drowned?'

'Why, of course he is not!'

Angelo in his heart was not at all sure of what he asserted so staunchly, but his words had the desired effect. Bianca shook off her lethargy and recovered her powers of thinking and of suffering.

'He has only escaped one danger to rush madly into another, far more terrible. By this time he may already be there — oh, Angelo! I am so miserable.' Bianca began to sob violently.

'What is the matter, Signorina?'

'Do you not know, Angelo? He is gone to fight a duel, and — and he may be killed ——'

'Madonna Santissima!' exclaimed the old man, thrusting his hands into his hair. 'Now I understand why you did not want him to go away.'

'You must go to the Palazzo Casale, Angelo,' said Bianca, trying to master her sobs, 'and wait until you learn the truth, or see Don Uberto return, if he is not still — *there!*' She pointed to the river and shuddered. 'Then you will come back as soon as possible to let me know.'

'Va bene,' answered Angelo, and he slipped on his coat and disappeared on his mission.

As Bianca sat alone with clasped hands, going over the different events of the morning, a great sense of horror and prostration filled her. She felt that she would like to turn away and hide herself in some lonely place beyond the reach of man, never again to share in life's joys or sorrows, and, above all, never to think again of love.

'This then is life!' she exclaimed aloud, 'and these are the tragedies love leads us to. I have done with it! I will have nothing more to do with its promises, which are as false as itself. What are the joys compared with the miseries that come with them, hand in hand?'

At that moment the reaction was so strong that had the Princess Astalli been there, she would have had no

difficulty in leading her child from the marble bench to the Convent on the hill.

She thought of the peaceful rest to be found only in renouncing the clamour, the deceit, and the fleeting fascination of the world, and she felt once more, as of old, that she must serve the only Master who could lead her by straight, sweet paths to His home beyond the skies.

She felt stronger now, and less reluctant to act her part with Lavinia, who must know nothing of what had occurred.

When on the point of opening her sister's door she paused. Would Lavinia see traces of tears on her face? She looked at herself in the mirror; the image she saw reflected there scarcely seemed like her own, it was so drawn and white. She bathed her eyes with cold water, thinking the while what she would say to Lavinia, and then unlocked the door.

Lavinia was lying across her bed, her head at the foot of it, and her feet not touching the floor. She barely opened her eyes on hearing Bianca approach, and then closed them again.

After her first passionate fit of weeping she had passed most of her time in trying to break down her doors, but the unyielding cruelty of inanimate things had conquered her at last, and she had given up the attempt, thoroughly exhausted morally and physically.

Bianca drew near and tried to take her hand.

'Go away!' said Lavinia, turning her head to the wall; 'you have betrayed the confidence I placed in you. You are no longer my sister or my friend.'

What little strength was left to Bianca almost failed her. She wondered if her prolonged agony would ever cease. But she had not time to think of herself just then. Lavinia must be comforted and prepared to bear the coming troubles.

'Uberto sends you this, and bids you wear it for his sake,' she said, giving her the ring.

Lavinia instantly recovered her old energy, and sat up on her bed. The colour returned to her cheeks and her eyes shone brightly, as she looked inquiringly into her sister's face.

'My ring, my own ring!' she exclaimed with delight, as she put it on her finger. 'Can it be true that it is the very same? Or am I dreaming?'

Bianca told her of the strange way in which it had been caught in a net in Uberto's presence, and of his own surprise on seeing it appear from the waters of the Tiber.

'This extraordinary recovery of your pledge to Uberto is a kind interference of Providence, Lavinia dear, and you must take it as a happy omen of coming peace. I foresee that your troubles will soon come to an end, darling,' whispered Bianca, putting her arms round Lavinia's neck.

Her words sounded hollow and dirge-like in her own ears. Perhaps it was only meant as a parting memento after all, she thought. Lavinia could not see her sad face nor the tears that fell over her shoulder; she was too much enraptured with her own selfish little joy. Nevertheless she returned Bianca's caress, the quarrel was forgotten, and the gentle sister forgiven.

The faithful old gardener in the meantime hurried, as fast as his aged legs could carry him, through the narrow winding streets and short-cuts to the Palazzo Casale. Nothing unusual seemed to have occurred there as yet. Angelo took up his station near the front door and watched the porter, who was cleaning the brass knobs and singing a Trasteverine 'Stornello.' The servants on the first floor were closing the shutters and the windows for the day, in the slow, monotonous way Italians have of doing their work when nothing exciting is going on in the family.

Though by no means a genius, Angelo had a good store

of common sense, and he began to calculate possibilities. If Don Uberto Casale was drowned, sufficient time had elapsed for the news of the accident to become known and telephoned to the Palazzo Casale. If instead he had gone to fight his duel, it was not possible for him to get out of town, to fight, and be back in less than two hours.

He did not know exactly what duels amongst gentlemen might be like. His experience was limited to the hot-blooded broils that took place in Trastevere, where a jealous husband or a fierce brother would walk up to their objectionable man, and pointing to the handle of the knife, just visible, would whisper, 'I will wait for you in Compare Giacomo's garden.' Never was one known to decline that invitation. Once there, with a few desperate thrusts they ended their quarrels — more often fatally than not.

Angelo had waited nearly two hours, when at last a carriage drove into the broad portico. As it passed him, he caught a glimpse of Don Uberto Casale's lifeless body extended on the cushions, and the face of a man, whom he took to be the surgeon, and who seemed to be supporting him.

Angelo followed the carriage into the court, and stood by when the landau was thrown open. The porter's speaking-tube had soon called into the court the Marchese Casale and all the servants, and many hands were extended to lift Don Uberto out of the carriage.

'Is he dead?' inquired Don Ferdinando of the surgeon in an awe-struck voice.

'Oh Dio! oh Dio! they have killed our Signorino! — *a tradimento,*' howled the servants.

'Don Uberto has received a wound in the head which has rendered him insensible,' said the surgeon in a loud voice, so as to silence the clamour, and be heard by all. 'Let us hope that it will not prove to be serious.'

The crowd was numerous enough to allow Angelo to

mingle with the others unobserved, and he followed the sad procession up the stairway for some little distance, till he had heard the doctor's words. Then, with tears in his eyes, he turned to go back and inform Donna Bianca of what had happened.

Bianca had been watching for his return behind the closed blinds, and when he told her of the sad scene he had witnessed on the stairs of the Palazzo Casale, her tears began to flow again, and her head drooped lower.

When Casale had taken his reckless plunge from the Astalli terrace, he had been lucky enough to fall into deep water, and he immediately rose to the surface. Swimming with the current, he looked back to see what had become of the club boat, which was just pulling away, and he had but time to swim rapidly to the nearest turn of the bank and hide himself in a green nook, before it shot out again into the middle of the river, and passed swiftly on its way towards the bridge. When it was well out of sight, he again threw himself into the water and swam to the Vicolo degli Astalli, where he got ashore, and ran at full speed to the Piazza Farnese.

The water was dripping from his clothes and soaked the cushions and the carpet of his carriage, and now and then he shivered and passed his wet sleeve over his head and face to arrest the muddy drops that blinded him.

On reaching his home he ordered the fastest horses in the stable to be harnessed to the landau, and in five minutes returned from his rooms dressed in dry garments. Notwithstanding the inconceivably short time it took him to drive from his house to the gate, he found his seconds waiting in ill-concealed astonishment at his delay. He motioned to them to get into his carriage, not trusting to the speed of their hired horses, and while they almost flew over the even, straight road which led to the Villa Lazzaroni, he told them something about one of his horses having fallen and broken the traces,

and his having to return home to get another carriage, as he could not drive to such an appointment in a cab. At the Villa Lazzaroni the apologies had to be repeated by Casale's seconds, and were received by those of the Signor Ferri with stiff bows and lifted eyebrows.

The chroniclers of the Roman world were unusually busy that evening. It was a long time since such an extraordinary harvest of startling events had been gathered in the monotonous summer life of the old city, and they lost no time in scattering the news to the four winds, in fashionable drawing-rooms, clubs, cafés, and private houses.

It was not so much the duel that attracted the attention of the scandal-mongers as the strange events at the Rowing club which had brought it about.

The finding of the ring and the little letter within the jewel-box, the contents of that letter, Don Uberto Casale's behaviour on seeing Signor Ferri open and read it — all these incidents gave rise to the wildest suppositions, which were enlarged upon and embroidered fantastically according to the ways of thinking, the habits and customs of the different members of society. Don Uberto Casale's unfortunate love for a daughter of Prince Astalli was in every one's mouth. New and romantic incidents were added to the old ones. What few truths were known were distorted and exaggerated, false conclusions arrived at, piquant ancedotes of a doubtful character were added, until the whole was a mass of the most absurd improbabilities. Passing from mouth to mouth, the tale in its ultimate shape told that Casale had fought the audacious Ferri because the latter had dared to be in love with the beautiful Lavinia. And no doubt all the old Astalli, dead and buried for centuries in their private chapel in the Church of San Filippo Neri, had turned in their coffins, and their hair and beards stood on end at the temerity of such an assertion. So much for what

was said about Donna Lavinia. But there were scandalous little stories regarding Donna Bianca's exploits as well, circulated in a whisper with a laugh from behind a fan, which tickled the ears of the greedy gossips with sevenfold delight. The thrilling story told by the Canottieri of how she had been seen wringing her hands and wild with terror, while a fine young fellow threw himself into the Tiber from her balcony at sunrise, was even more fascinating than the story of the mysterious ring.

Those who had for so long mercilessly ridiculed the austere and antiquated fashion of bringing up children in the Casa Astalli, now exulted at the disastrous effects produced by such unreasonable severity. And if any one were so charitable as to attempt to disculpate the little nun by hazarding the suggestion that what was said of her might not be true after all, and that fortuitous circumstances might have made her seem the heroine of an adventure of Lavinia's, there were plenty of people ready and eager to confute the kind interpretation by merely pointing out the hour and minute of Casale's duel, and the consequent impossibility of his being the hero of the fable.

The Signora Camilla was amongst the first to be informed of what was being said. She listened with incredulous surprise to Count Segni's account of the morning's proceedings, and at once set about to learn more from others. Everywhere she was met by the same story, but so amplified and made so plausible by the addition of minute details, enhancing its grace and harmony, as to give it an air of unassailable truth. As the artist loves to polish, refine and perfect his work before exposing it to the public, so the world does not allow its pet scandals to leave its hand until they are complete and harmonious to the last touch and detail.

There was no time to be lost if, according to her habit, the Signora Camilla wished to be the first to carry the

news to the mother of the two culprits. She had always considered it especially incumbent on her to be the bearer of strange and startling novelties to the mummified occupants of the dull old palace. She ordered her carriage, and half an hour later was shown into the Princess's boudoir.

'To what lucky inspiration do I owe the happiness of seeing you at this hour?' asked the Princess smiling, as she welcomed her friend. 'I thought you were to dine with us to-day?'

'So I am!' answered the Signora Camilla in her high, oily voice. 'But I had something so pressing to say to you that I could not wait till eight o'clock this evening.'

It was evident from the Princess Astalli's surprised and amused look that she knew nothing of the rumours afloat about her daughters. The Signora Camilla was about to open her friend's eyes in rather a violent and unusual manner, and she expected a scene. But her courage rose as she faced the danger.

'Ebbene? What are you going to do with your girls?' she inquired, opening fire.

'What an odd question!' exclaimed the Princess. 'You know as well as I what I mean to do with them.'

'Indeed you are mistaken,' retorted the Signora Camilla. 'I know a good deal about them — that is true — and so does all Rome just now, and I am beginning to believe that you know very little!'

The Princess lifted her eyebrows and listened in surprise to her friend's short, detached sentences, but not catching the meaning of her thrusts, she quietly ignored them.

'I will wait a few days longer until they are less nervous and agitated, and then I mean to separate them. I think it will prove to be the best remedy. After all they are so young, you know! And without being too severe and unbending, I believe that when they find

themselves deprived of the comfort and support of each other's society, they will return to their former submissive obedience, and these unfortunate events will be forgotten!'

'I do not agree with you,' replied the Signora Camilla, lifting her nose in the air.

'And why not, pray?'

'Because if what is being said publicly in Rome about Lavinia and Bianca be true, they are not exactly on the road which leads to submission and blind subordination —and, above all, not to the Convent!'

'What has Rome to do with my private affairs?' asked the Princess, drawing herself up haughtily. 'To whom have I given permission to discuss or even observe what goes on within the walls of my own palace?'

'I am afraid, my dear Agnese, that notwithstanding your objections, the world is discussing very freely what is going on just outside the very high walls of your palace, if not within!' replied the Signora Camilla.

'I take no interest in what goes on "just outside," and if other people would follow my example there would be less sinning against one's neighbours,' retorted the Princess sharply.

'When people like you, mio cara,' answered the Signora Camilla with a little nervous laugh, 'are so charitably-minded as not to wish their neighbours to throw stones, they should not live in glass houses.'

'It seems to me that you are bent on throwing stones at me to-day, my dear Camilla, whether my house be of glass or not!' the Princess observed in a piqued tone.

'You are again mistaken,' rejoined her friend quickly. 'I have not come to quarrel with an old friend, but simply to warn her that something very extraordinary is taking place here, which is the talk of the town.'

The Princess changed colour. She dreaded to hear what it was that had brought the Signora Camilla to her

house. It was something disagreeable about her daughters, she was sure, and she hated the idea that people busied themselves about them.

'It is better that you should know the whole truth,' pursued the Signora Camilla, after waiting some moments for her friend to speak. 'There is a frightful scandal afloat about — Bianca!'

'About Bianca!' exclaimed the Princess in amazement.

'Yes, about Bianca. It seems that our dear little nun was seen on the terrace this morning at sunrise with a young man. No wonder you look amazed! So was I when I heard it,' added the Signora Camilla. 'But the worst is yet to be told. It appears that this same young fellow climbed over the balcony of the Belvedere and threw himself into the river! All this was seen by the whole crew of one of the Rowing club boats which happened to be passing just then. And as I could not believe my ears when Guido, my nephew — he was one of the crew — told me about it, I never rested until I had interrogated each one of the other six privately, and they all repeated the same extravagant story, and even said that they were ready to swear to it!'

'And all this absurd rigmarole is about little Bianca!' The Princess burst out laughing. 'It is simply ridiculous, and your seven young friends are seven madmen escaped from the Palazzina. This is the latest scandal, is it? I give you my word, my dear, that before night every one of these cowardly liars shall have eaten his words! How could you believe such nonsense about Bianca, you, who know her so well,' she continued, after a pause, 'and have the heart to come and repeat it to me, her mother?'

'I confess it was hard to believe at first, and I even suspected that the eye-witnesses of the feat had mistaken Bianca for Lavinia, and that the man who had escaped by a perilous plunge in the Tiber was no other than

Uberto Casale — which would have cleared the mystery ——'

'It would have cleared nothing!' interrupted the Princess angrily, 'and your supposition is just as absurd. Do you believe that an Astalli would make love from her balcony, and listen to an "appassionato" like a girl of the common people?'

'But this mistake was not possible,' continued the Signora Camilla, heedless of the Princess's proud incredulity, 'because at that very hour Casale was fighting a duel about Lavinia at the Villa Lazzaroni.'

'Uberto was fighting a duel — about my daughter!' uttered the Princess in deep, staccato notes. 'Who authorised him to do such a thing? How dare he drag our name down to the level to which he has sunk? A duel — a duel about Lavinia? Have all the Romans gone raving mad this morning?'

She was so agitated that her friend thought it prudent to wait a few moments before adding fresh fuel to the flames of the Princess's fury. Before long, however, she returned to the subject, and told all the particulars she had heard of the scene on the terrace and of Casale's quarrel with Ferri, and how it had originated in the fierce insistence of the latter to read what was written on a little paper he had found in the box with the ring.

The Princess listened to these overwhelming testimonies of her children's conduct without uttering a word. Her face was more sallow than usual, the wrinkles around her thin lips had deepened into heavy lines, and her eyes were bent on the floor. She gave no outward expression to her feelings, but she looked as though she were listening to her death-warrant. What she heard was the moral annihilation of her daughters' good name and the dishonour of her house. She would have infinitely preferred death in any shape.

When she heard of the letter in the jewel-case she

knit her brows, and for one moment her face seemed convulsed by the strong inward emotion she did her best to hide.

'Did you really say that there was a letter in that box?' she asked in a low voice.

'There can be no doubt about that!' promptly asserted the Signora Camilla, 'as it was the only real "casus belli"!'

'Then the devil had a hand in it!' rejoined the Princess in despair.

Only a few hours earlier Bianca had assured Lavinia that the hand of Providence had directed that same circumstance, for she and her mother attributed to God or to the devil the most important events of their lives, according as they considered them favourable or contrary to their own personal desires.

'This is no working of the devil, my dear,' exclaimed the practical Signora Camilla. 'It is simply the natural manifestation of human passion.'

It was a terrible blow to dignity, to the prestige of name, to motherly pride, to have to doubt Bianca's virtue. In her deep and silent mortification the Princess sustained a violent battle between her faith in her child and the outward proofs of her unworthiness, and the latter triumphed. Then she wept bitterly — burning, comfortless tears.

The Signora Camilla sat in respectful silence by her side, awed by the genuine outburst of so profound a sorrow. She had not thought her friend capable of so much feeling, and she liked her the better for it.

But this outward manifestation of weakness on the Princess's part did not last long. She dried her eyes, and smoothed down her ruffled hair with a determined gesture, which betrayed the habit of command over herself and over others. She was one made to act, and not to give way to her feelings.

'Come with me,' she said, rising, 'let us go to the girls — they will tell us the truth about all this.'

Even then, notwithstanding her convictions of a moment earlier, it did not cross her mind that Lavinia or Bianca could do otherwise than speak the truth; and she thus unconsciously rendered a tribute to the dignity of their characters, which the Signora Camilla perceived, but thought wise to let pass unobserved.

CHAPTER XXI

MADEMOISELLE GILBERTE sat alone in the study, and informed the Princess and the Signora Camilla that the two girls had gone with their work to the terrace.

They found them in the Belvedere, the theatre of so many strange scenes during the last few hours, seated side by side in mournful silence on the marble bench.

Bianca was the sadder of the two. Between her past emotions, her harrowing anxieties about Uberto, and her constant fear lest by some imprudence of hers or by some one else's inadvertence Lavinia should discover the dreadful secret she was toiling to keep from her, each moment of her existence was one of new torture. She had sent Angelo back to the Palazzo Casale to await Uberto's return to consciousness, and if possible bring her the last news he could obtain from the doctors. And as time wore on and still he did not appear, her restlessness became almost too unbearable to conceal. On seeing her mother and the Signora Camilla on the terrace at that hour, she immediately guessed that some misfortune had happened, and making a great effort to overcome the fright that seemed to nail her to her seat, she rose to meet them, and moved as far out of Lavinia's hearing as was possible, still hoping to shield her from any sudden shock.

'Is it true, Bianca,' asked her mother, when she had entered the Belvedere, 'that you were not in your room this morning at sunrise, and that some one from the river saw you standing here?'

Bianca hesitated and looked at Lavinia. She was not

ashamed or very much afraid of telling the whole truth to her mother, but just then she was studying how she could manage to answer the direct question without referring to the tragic scene of the balcony, or revealing Uberto's duel, which had been the cause of it.

But Lavinia interpreted Bianca's glance as an appeal to her for help. She was used to feeling that her more timid sister leaned on her for support, especially since these last difficulties had arisen, and she naturally concluded from her look that Bianca needed her more than ever now, since she was about to be made to suffer for what she had done for her sister's sake.

'Mamma,' said Lavinia, stepping forward and standing between Bianca and her mother, 'it is quite true that Bianca was here this morning. She came for my sake, to prevent me from doing what she thought was wrong!'

The Princess drew back as though some one had struck her in the face. Her pallor increased and her hands trembled. She mustered strength, however, to continue the investigation, though she felt as if she were walking on red-hot iron.

'And who was the man who escaped by jumping into the river?'

'The man she came to meet was Uberto, mamma — my betrothed,' smilingly answered Lavinia. She was very happy and grateful to her mother for affording her this new opportunity of openly confirming her engagement. 'We were to have met here this morning, but Bianca prevented it by locking me up in my room. As for a man having escaped by jumping over the railing, that would be impossible and ridiculous, considering that there is a staircase which leads to the street!' and she pointed to the door, which stood ajar, behind them. Bianca said not a word. She looked pertinaciously and pleadingly into the Signora Camilla's eyes, as though to implore her to put a stop to the dangerous inquest.

The Signora Camilla had heard enough to inspire her with wondering admiration for the man who had been clever enough to be in two places at the same time — in the river and at Villa Lazzaroni.

'You see, my dear,' she said soothingly, 'it was all a great mistake, and the girls were only guilty of an imprudence.' She wanted to dam the flood of holy wrath she saw surging up in her friend's breast, and if possible prevent its overwhelming the frightened victims.

'Can you give me your word, Lavinia, that you were never alone here with Uberto?' asked the Princess anxiously. Dreadful doubts still haunted her mind.

'Oh yes, mamma!' exclaimed Lavinia. 'I will even swear to it if that would give you pleasure!'

A frank open smile spread over her face, and her eyes danced mischievously at the remembrance of the passionate kisses she had exchanged with Uberto, while old Angelo looked on, and of their perfect indifference to his presence. She looked so simply truthful, so candid and guileless, as she frankly met her mother's gaze, that the last fears fled, and the Princess heaved a great sigh of relief.

'Why did you come at all, Bianca?' asked the Princess, pursuing her inquiry.

'I came,' replied Bianca, 'because, knowing our dear Uberto to be impetuous and daring, I feared that he would do something rash in his anxiety at not finding Lavinia where he had expected to meet her. I intended to dismiss him as hastily as possible, and bid him come no more.'

Now that the Princess felt sure, from Bianca's explanation and Lavinia's open confession, that nothing very serious had occurred on that morning, her fright and suspicions gave way to an attack of rage.

'You have behaved in the most infamous, abominable, and degraded way,' she cried fiercely, stepping up to

them and shaking her hands in their faces. 'You have made your father and me, and the very name you bear, objects of ridicule all over the city. Neither of us could dare show our faces in the streets without being pointed at with contempt as the parents of two shameless daughters. You have trodden under foot your honour and ours, and not a man in Italy would marry either of you!'

'Dear Agnese, do calm yourself!' said the Signora Camilla, really frightened to see her friend so convulsed by anger.

'Leave me alone!' said the Princess under her breath, pushing the Signora Camilla away.

'You, Lavinia,' she pursued in tones still more shrill and angry, 'have been receiving love-letters from a man you ought to have treated as a stranger, because we ordered you to do so; and you have met him clandestinely at improper hours, as if you were no better than a low, contemptible woman of the people. And you, Bianca,' she said, turning to her other daughter, 'in trying to prevent a scandal have incurred as much shame as your sister, if not more. Yes, it is as I say!' she continued more emphatically, seeing Bianca's energetic gesture of protest; 'a boat full of those modern types of godless, reckless youths was passing under this balcony — they saw you with a man, and are at this moment spreading a story to your dishonour, too horrible for me to repeat.'

The two girls gazed at their mother in something very like horror. Never before had she spoken thus to them, and never before had nameless actions been hinted at in their presence. They scarcely knew what she was saying, so great was their terror, but they vaguely understood that she was accusing them, and believing them guilty of some shameful action, because a set of men, whom she herself had qualified as godless and reckless, chose to accuse them of it.

Bianca shuddered and covered her face with her hands, while Lavinia cast imploring glances first upon her mother's hard and relentless eyes, and then at the Signora Camilla, pleading for mercy and sympathy. But the one had none to give, and the other dared not give the little she had.

Then she turned towards Bianca with a low despairing wail, and the two forlorn, broken-hearted girls, moved by the same impulse, fell into each other's arms and sobbed passionately.

The result of her tirade was entirely satisfactory to the Princess, and exactly what she had meant it to be. When she ceased speaking she watched her children without a sign of commiseration. Now and then she shot a sharp, self-satisfied glance at the Signora Camilla, to see whether her victory over her daughters had made due impression on her friend.

'I have effectually broken their high spirits,' she said to her, 'and if after this they do not return to me the most submissive and the humblest of children, I shall indeed say that the case is hopeless.'

As for the public scandal, she could easily overcome that! She had only to bid the Signora Camilla inform society that it was Bianca and not Lavinia who had been seen with Uberto — carefully hiding the fact that it was not the lovers' first meeting — and in less than twenty-four hours all the world would know exactly what she wished to be known, and her daughters' reputation would be saved.

Prince Astalli, followed by the chaplain, emerged from the library at that moment, and joined the group.

'Dio buono!' exclaimed the Prince impatiently, pointing to the two girls, who were still locked in each other's arms. 'What in the world is the matter with them?'

'Let them be — they are repenting of their sins — it is good for them — their tears will purify their souls,' explained the Princess, in a self-satisfied voice.

'Gesù mio!' murmured Don Antonio, his eyes filling with tears, as he in his turn drew near, 'will Thou never let Thy peace descend upon these poor little lambs of Thine?'

He also had been informed of the current scandal, and with the experience of human nature which every priest acquires in the confessional, and his own knowledge of the two girls' characters, he very nearly guessed the exact truth. He had already been to the Palazzo Casale, hoping to see Uberto. But there he was met by the surgeon, who told him that Don Uberto was still unconscious. His temperature had risen, he said, leading him to believe that before long there would be a change in his condition, but whether for the better or the worse it was impossible to say. What seemed evident to the doctor at present was, that Don Uberto Casale had either committed some rash imprudence or received a violent shock before his duel, and he feared that the consequences would either be brain fever or a very dangerous attack of pneumonia. The wound in itself was not so serious. In the first examination on the spot, the surgeon added, he had been amazed to find that Don Uberto's thick hair was dripping with water, and to this extraordinary circumstance he attributed the comparative insignificance of the wound. The wet and closely matted hair had turned the blade, notwithstanding the weight of the blow. But this persistent unconsciousness, the surgeon declared, was alarming, and he could not as yet prognosticate the consequences.

When Don Antonio returned to the Palazzo Astalli with a heavy heart, he decided to address himself to the Prince first, hoping to find him less inflexible and more prudent than his wife, and to induce him to speak to his daughters alone.

Prince Astalli listened with solemn gravity. He attached less importance to the scandalous rumours afloat,

than to this new proof of the depth of Lavinia's devotion to Uberto. Don Antonio had succeeded in persuading him that it would be wiser to speak to his daughters first alone, but the Signora Camilla had forestalled him, and he only arrived in time to see the dramatic termination of the scene, which spoke eloquently of the Princess's delicacy and forbearance towards her children.

She was now completely herself again, ready to spread terror and dismay in the breasts of all who dared oppose her. She was rather glad that her husband should be there to lend solemnity to the scene by his presence, and to increase the culprits' shame. She meant this to be a sort of last judgment; the real true ending of all those perilous innovations in her family, which had made her life a burden to her for the last five months.

It was well that the priest should be there also — by his holy character he would give weight to the promises of perpetual submission which she intended to extort from the culprits.

'Have you informed my wife of all that is being said of our daughters?' asked the Prince of the Signora Camilla.

'Yes,' interrupted the Princess, before her friend had time to speak. 'I know all — and so do they! But, thank God, things are not so bad as they at first seemed. Our honour is safe. The man who was seen here this morning was Uberto, and it was Bianca who met him in her sister's stead. Lavinia, to her shame, has continued to correspond with Uberto Casale, notwithstanding our opposition, thereby encouraging his absurd hopes, which have resulted in his believing himself authorised to fight a duel for her.'

At these words Lavinia raised her head from her sister's shoulder, and looked at her mother.

'What did you say, mamma?' she asked with a startled look in her deep, sad eyes.

Receiving no immediate answer from her mother, she turned to Bianca.

'Did she say that Uberto had fought a duel? Bianca! you know the truth — I see it in your eyes. What new misfortune has befallen us?'

She seemed so pathetically weary as she looked into their faces, asking to know the worst, and, as it were, already overcome by what they had to tell her, that no one had the courage to speak.

'If anything happens to Uberto I know I shall soon follow him,' she said despairingly. 'Perhaps it is better so — life is too cruel!'

'Lavinia mia, do not say such things!' cried Bianca, taking her hands. 'Uberto is alive — all I know is that he is wounded.'

Then a sudden change came over Lavinia. She rose from the seat where she had sunk, and walked up to her mother with her left arm extended.

'God has given me a heartless mother!' she said between her teeth, in a voice so passionate that she could scarcely make it heard, and every nerve in her body quivering. 'A wild beast in its den is more merciful to its young than you have been to me! You put a cup to my lips brimful of joy, and you bade me drink of it because you said God willed it so — and before I had tasted half its sweetness you dashed it from me because it was not of gold. You saw me weep — you knew my heart was breaking — but you were harder than stone! You taught me that your will was the will of Heaven, and I? — I believed it — fool that I was! — until I learned with tears of blood that I had a right to live and love, and that my free will should be neither subjected to you, nor to any one else, save God. You cut me off from what was life and happiness to me, and when I fought you with the only weapons I had — when in my despair I deceived you. in defence of my rights, you turned upon me, upbraided me, and accused me of shameful things; and you chose the moment when you knew

that Uberto lay dying — perhaps, for having defended my name against the very accusations you have cast at me — to try and crush me to the earth, and trample upon me!'

Her tall, slender frame was wrapped in her wrath as in a royal mantle, and her voice rang louder and louder with the overwhelming strength of her own eloquence. There was a newly-acquired womanly depth in the expression of her face, and her fearlessness in unburdening her heart of the spirit of revolt that had so long been hidden there, awed and silenced her mother.

The Princess could not call up one of her stereotyped sentences about obedience, submission, and filial respect now. They would have sounded vapid and incongruous after Lavinia's passionate protest. Her sceptre was broken, the fictitious, high-sounding oracles to which she was in the habit of appealing were silenced. The statue of the goddess of fine phrases and family traditions had been dashed to the ground and broken to pieces by one wave of Lavinia's hand.

'Padre mio,' said Lavinia, appealing to her father, for an instinct told her that at that moment he was perhaps nearer to understanding her than he had ever been before in his life, 'Do you believe these horrors of Bianca and of me?'

'No, no, my child,' he answered quickly, shaking his head, 'but you are too violent against your mother.'

Then seeing that his wife had only been waiting for some small encouragement to break forth again in greater anger, he went to her, and whispered something in her ear.

She rose and reluctantly followed him to the railing of the balcony.

Lavinia stood erect, expecting the deserved reprimand, but as none came, she turned with a scornful smile and addressed herself to Don Antonio.

'Will you tell me all you know of Uberto's duel, amico mio?' she pleaded, her voice trembling slightly.

'Don Uberto received a slight wound in the head,' answered the chaplain. 'I saw the surgeon, and he told me that he hoped to bring him through without serious trouble. Trust in God, my child, He will not forsake you.'

'Thank you, Don Antonio, I feared worse! You tell me to trust in God, but does it not seem to you that He has forgotten us of late? When did you hear last of Uberto?'

'I went there this morning at ten o'clock,' answered the priest.

'And you have heard nothing since?' inquired Lavinia excitedly. 'Please, Don Antonio, take a cab and go at once to the Palazzo Casale, and bring me the latest news!'

Another person was now listening to their conversation. Angelo stood in the little door, not daring to come forward. He wondered at hearing Donna Lavinia speak thus fearlessly about Don Uberto Casale in her parents' presence, but as it was none of his business, he thought he might as well be as imprudent as she. He came forward and took off his hat.

'If your Excellencies wish to hear good news of Don Uberto, I am at your Excellencies' orders,' he said with a broad smile.

'God bless you, Angelo! Tell me what you know — and quickly!' On seeing him smile and speak of good news Lavinia's tears began to flow.

'Will your Excellency permit me to answer the young lady's question?' the gardener asked of his master.

The Prince vouchsafed to consent by a scarcely perceptible movement of his hand.

'Since I am allowed to speak, I will tell you that the Signorino is doing very well. When he came to himself he asked for something to drink in the most natural voice

possible. It seems *they*' — Romans always speak of an unknown enemy in the plural — 'they gave him a terrible blow, which would have split anybody else's head, but Don Uberto's, they said, was as hard as that of Marcus Aurelius, our old father on the Capitol Hill, and he is all the better for it now!'

Lavinia took his great rough hands in hers, and pressed them warmly.

'God be praised!' she exclaimed, 'and you, my dear old friend, are indeed my guardian angel, to bring me such good news.'

Donna Bianca and the old priest drew near, and they all became very animated and excited over the intelligence, gesticulating and talking loudly at the same time.

Prince and Princess Astalli alone took no share in the general rejoicings, and feeling themselves awkwardly out of place, they moved away with the Signora Camilla.

'Did you see Don Uberto with your own eyes?' inquired Lavinia of the old man, who for the first time in his life found himself exalted to the enviable position of a hero.

'See him? Indeed I did, Signorina! I walked boldly into the servants' hall, and found myself in a crowd of footmen of the most respectable Roman houses, who had come to get the doctor's last bulletin and make the butler write their masters' names in the book on the table. To one of the Marchese Casale's servants, whom I saw passing by, I said that I had been sent by the Eccellentissima Casa Astalli, whereupon all the others stood back and looked at me, and instead of giving me the little bit of square paper, which none of us can read, the man made me go up a private staircase into the hall above. I did not have to wait long. Don Uberto's servant opened a door and beckoned to me to follow him.'

'Did he take you into Don Uberto's room without consulting the doctor?' inquired Lavinia anxiously.

'That might have been bad for him, if he was to be kept quiet!'

'Not a bit of it,' exclaimed Angelo, 'he was in bed with his head bound up in white bandages, and looking terribly pale, but he smiled all the same, and said he was well, except that his ideas were a little confused. But I saw no symptoms of that, for he asked at once if Donna Lavinia had been told of what had happened, and when I said that Donna Bianca had kept it from her, and sent me for news, he seemed much relieved.'

'Did he not say something more about me?' inquired Lavinia.

Angelo had a great deal to communicate to her on that subject, and she never wearied of asking new questions. Their conversation had become quite intimate, and Bianca thought to give her sister pleasure by leaving her alone with the messenger.

She took Don Antonio's hand and drew him after her under the green archway. For some time they walked up and down the shaded alley, Don Antonio, with bent head and his hands clasped behind his back, listened with concentrated attention to what Bianca was saying to him in a very earnest manner.

'Now Don Antonio,' pursued Bianca, as if concluding the very serious argument which interested them both so deeply, 'it has not escaped Lavinia's notice or mine that you are not at all adverse to our cause, and it seems to me that it would be loyal and magnanimous on your part to join the rebels outright to-day and use the influence you possess over papa to make him agree to my plan, which would put an end to all the miseries in our family. I caught a look of despair and discouragement in his eyes just now, when Lavinia turned on mamma in that violent way. Believe me, he is tired out with the life we lead him! Something must be done, and you yourself admitted just now that my project was perfectly regular,

and could in no way be disapproved of by the Church authorities.'

'Quite so,' acquiesced Don Antonio.

'Very well — now let us go and do what is right,' continued Bianca very decidedly. 'Something tells me that this is the proper time to act. Heaven will inspire me! You, Don Antonio, will sustain me by your wise words, Lavinia by her love, and I will find courage and strength in the justice of what I mean to do.'

When they were near Lavinia, who still stood talking to Angelo, Bianca called her sister.

'Lavinia,' she said, 'come with us. God has inspired me to propose a means of ending all our woes. Do not let us delay a moment. Come quickly, for I see papa and mamma are going to take the Signora Camilla into the drawing-room, and I would rather she were present at our interview.'

Lavinia wondered what was to happen next, as she followed her to the square space under the brown awning before the drawing-room, where the Princess and her guest had seated themselves in the welcome shade.

'I have something very important to say to you, papa,' said Bianca, throwing back the curtain and drawing near the group, followed by Lavinia and the priest. 'The angel of peace has fled from our home lately. We are all dreadfully unhappy, and no one seems to know how to call the angel back again! I think I may be the peacemaker between you — the bearer of the olive branch. Do not turn your head away like that, mamma,' she said beseechingly, as she saw her mother's forbidding expression. 'I need your approval and your consent, that what I mean to do may be truly a peace-making. But should you refuse me both, I turn to my father and ask him in the name of all that is just and righteous, to bear with me, and give me his support, even against your will!'

The Princess frowned. Was this then to be the grand

finale, the 'coup de théâtre' that she had so cleverly combined an hour before, when she had held both the weeping girls under her iron grasp? She would make one more effort to recover the reins of authority, and repair the evil done by her husband's and the chaplain's untimely interference. Had it not been for them, the girls would have been at her feet by this time.

The thought maddened her, and she was about to attempt another attack when an imperious gesture of the Prince held her in silence.

'Speak, Bianca,' he said solemnly. 'If what you propose be possible, I promise you my support.'

He was weary of the constant warfare in which he was being daily outwitted by the cunning of two simple girls, and he was only too happy to think that there existed some way of getting out of a false and embarrassing position, without loss of dignity, or an unconditional surrender.

'You broke off Lavinia's engagement,' resumed Bianca, 'for no other reason than because Uberto had become poor. I propose to remedy this deficiency by making over to them the fortune left me by my godmother. I know what you wish to say,' she continued, waving her hand to prevent the interruption, which was evidently imminent, 'that by thus disposing of my fortune I shall not be fulfilling my aunt's secret intentions. But you must resign yourselves to the fact that neither her pious desires, nor your injunctions, commands, or prayers, will ever induce me to become a Carmelite. Is it not true, Don Antonio, that they cannot force me to become a nun against my will?' she said, suddenly turning to the priest for moral support.

'In the name of the Church of which I am the humblest minister, I can vouch for it,' he replied with dignity.

'And Don Antonio also told me that you can only prevent me from following my calling so long as I am a

minor. By acquiescing to my desire at once, you will ward off future complications, reap the benefit of a good action, and enjoy the same satisfaction you would have experienced had I bid you distribute my fortune amongst the poor, which I shall certainly do if I cannot give it to Lavinia. I know that I can in perfect tranquillity of conscience dispose of it as I please.'

'But, my dear Bianca ——' began the Prince.

'Oh, papa, do not discuss the matter now, it is too late for that!' she cried impetuously. 'Give me your free consent to become a Sister of Charity. By sacrificing what you wrongly consider the family dignity, you will have granted me the only favour I shall ever ask of you, and made us both perfectly happy! The Sister of Charity, you know, papa, leaves her name and that of her family the day she enters the Convent, and while she searches in life's darkest paths for those who suffer life's bitterest pain, no one can guess whether the grey frock hides a princess or a beggar!'

Lavinia clasped her hands, and listened in rapture to her sister's earnest exhortation.

It was not her sister, but an angel in the semblance of Bianca, who had rent the dark clouds and who stood before her now in the sweet glimmer of a Heavenly light, an olive branch in one hand and a bridal wreath in the other.

She would have fallen on her knees to speak out all her joy and her thanksgiving, but her sister caught her in her arms and pressed her to her heart.

The Princess sat with downcast eyes and folded hands. No Heavenly vision of peace and joy had been granted her. She gave no outward sign of anger or of approval. Once only she looked across at her husband, but meeting his stern, cold eyes, she bent her head still lower, and was silent.

'Your proposition is very startling, my child,' said the

Prince after a rather long interval, in a grave but kind voice. 'I cannot on my sole authority give my consent to an arrangement which implies the spoliation of a religious order to enrich a member of our family. Contrary to the fashion of these new Italians, we are used to give and not to take from the convents. But since you tell me that your conscience, directed by wise ministers of God, authorises you to dispose in this way of your fortune, I will go at once to his Holiness, expose the case to him, and if he approves of your proposal, our approbation shall not be wanting, inasmuch as it is our duty to obey always when our Holy Father speaks. I may be wrong — but I think your decision both wise and just.'

The Princess rose from her low arm-chair, and without a look at her children or her husband, withdrew to her own apartment and locked her door.

The Prince politely escorted the Signora Camilla to the hall, after she had embraced the two girls, and half an hour later was closeted with the Holy Father in his private audience-room, on the entresol of the Vatican Palace.

Lavinia in her happiness thought first of Mademoiselle Gilberte. It was only just that she should have her share of the new hope that Bianca had kindled in all their hearts. She received a full account of Bianca's happy inspiration and generous offer, but all allusions to the very suspicious incidents which had immediately preceded this unexpected event were carefully avoided.

Lavinia expatiated upon her sister's goodness and cleverness in her old, joyous, enthusiastic way. She embraced the old lady until her high cap sat awry, and it was as much as Don Antonio could do to keep her from giving him a share of her loving and grateful caresses.

'What do you think the Holy Father will say to papa, Don Antonio?' she asked.

'The Pope is a most holy and wise man, my child, and I doubt not will be happy to give his "placet" to Bianca's judicious disposal of her fortune, which will not only assure your happiness in this world — and indirectly, perhaps, in the next — but will also allow Bianca to become a saint of the religious order she loves best.'

* * * * *

On a bright winter's morning about a month after Don Uberto Casale's marriage to Donna Lavinia degli Astalli, a long line of carriages, bearing the crests and arms of the best known Roman families, drew up before the little door of a modest-looking building, flanked by a small modern Gothic church on the avenue which leads from Santa Maria Maggiore to the Metropolitan Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano.

The carriages were conveying the relatives and friends of Casa Astalli, who had been invited to assist at the ceremony of the taking of the veil by Donna Bianca degli Astalli.

The high altar of the little church was decked with many wax tapers and fresh flowers, gathered in the Convent garden. From without, through the long arched windows, with their images of saints and angels in many-coloured glasses, the rays of the sun spread splendour and warmth, turning into cloth of purple and gold the unpretending hangings with which the sisters had adorned their chapel — so far as their poverty allowed them — to welcome the maiden who had asked to share their privations and their labours.

Bianca was led in by two sisters, dressed as a bride, her soft auburn hair covered with the long flowing veil, and crowned with orange blossoms intermingled with the family diamonds.

An undefinable pang clutches the heart at the sight of a fair young maiden led thus to the altar, where no visi-

ble bridegroom awaits her. It is a wedding. The white bridal robes are there, the sweet flowers and the happy music. And yet it is a burial too. A black shroud is spread over the prostrate form, the prayers of the dead are chanted, and the bride, so beautiful in her rich garments and heavy jewels but a moment before, is now despoiled of her worldly ornaments; the priest cuts off her long tresses, the pride and glory of her womanhood, and places them in a silver dish, and while spreading over her the emblematic veil of poverty, chastity, and obedience, he bids the sisters, her kindred, and her friends, to pray for the nameless one, who is now dead to the world for ever.

To see one die thus, and in the prime of life — renounce all its joys — seems so strange that one involuntarily looks in the multitude for the tyrant who is dragging an innocent victim to the sacrifice.

One has heard and read so much of those dark times when such things were done by force, that one half expects to see the knight of the legend rush to the altar and drag the monastic bride away, before the cruel blade has severed her long locks — it would seem but just and natural. But Bianca had chosen her lot of her own will, and to-day she was sealing her resolve in profound and peaceful joy. Not a shadow overcast her pure brow — she walked to the altar with sure and jubilant step, knowing that, unlike the earthly brides, she had no surprises in store for her in the future.

Lavinia watched with growing anguish each detail of the long ceremony, which at every moment seemed further to sever her sister from herself and from the beautiful world without. She grasped Uberto's arm as if to make sure that he was still beside her, and that it was not she who was called upon to renounce all those joys of which she had only now begun to taste.

When the ceremony was over, the guests were invited

to partake of a very modest 'rinfresco' in the sisters' refectory, a bare cold room on the ground-floor.

Bianca appeared in her grey frock and picturesque headgear, her rosary at her side, and while bidding farewell, she asked them all to rejoice with her in her happiness in having reached at last the haven of rest and peace she had hoped for so long.

'We must part, my beloved ones,' she said, taking Lavinia's and Uberto's hands in hers. 'You must walk in the way that the Lord has shown you, and so must I. All righteous roads lead to Heaven, and we shall meet there one day.'

'Ah, Sorellina!' exclaimed Lavinia, weeping bitterly, 'that we should part just when we have accomplished what we most longed for in life!'

'There is no true happiness in this world, my dear ones!' exclaimed Bianca, 'I have found that out, and that is why I have chosen this life. The nearest approach to it is goodness, and the path to goodness is charity. Upon that road I am now beginning my journey.'

'And to think that we believed for one moment that you would not take the veil,' said Lavinia.

'It is too true. A doubt seized me for one brief instant,' sighed Bianca, 'and you were the cause of it, my dear ones! Your love was a revelation to me. You opened before my eyes a new horizon so full of beauty and joy that the light of it dazzled me. And — Lavinia, I must tell you all! In those days, when your love was the cause of so much suffering to you both, when on all sides it was met by opposition and vexations, I was secretly tortured by the desire to love and to be loved like you — to suffer as you were suffering! But there came one day an awakening so agonising, so heartrending, that I turned with disgust from all human love, and sought again this peaceful goal. I am not sorry now to have endured that temptation. It has taught me the true meaning of the

one great passion of life. Henceforth I shall be stronger, and better able to understand the miseries of mankind. One great comfort will be to try to soothe and allay them, and the other to know that you, Lavinia, are happy with Uberto. I shall pray unceasingly that it may be so till death, and beyond, for ever.'

'But, darling,' sobbed Lavinia, passionately embracing the calm and placid little nun, 'you will be taken away from us! — perhaps we shall never see you again!'

'No, sister,' replied Bianca, returning her caresses, 'you will see me always. We are spread over the world. When you meet one of my companions you will be meeting me. We are all sisters, and you may call each one of us by that loving, tender name.' Then after a moment, when Lavinia's sobs seemed to subside, 'If I ever meet with a happy married couple in my wanderings,' she added with a smile, 'I shall think of you and Uberto!'

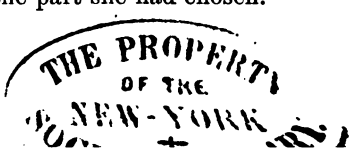
'Ah, Sorellina!' exclaimed Lavinia, 'you will meet but few who love each other as we do!'

'Yes, that is only too true!' replied Bianca, 'and that is the reason why I did not wish to run the fearful risk. You won a prize in the lottery of life — I might have lost — and I had not the courage to stake my happiness on blind chance.'

A little bell tinkled within the cloister. It was the signal that parents, kindred, and friends should depart, and leave the peaceful retreat to its usual tranquillity and silence. They issued one by one from the little door, saluting Bianca on their way.

Lavinia was the last to depart — and Uberto had to push her gently over the threshold that the nun might close the Convent door.

Thus Martha and her sister Mary, having suffered, and been troubled about many things, reached happily at last the end of their trials, well satisfied to have fought, and to have won each the part she had chosen.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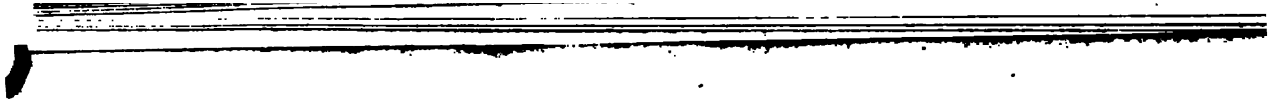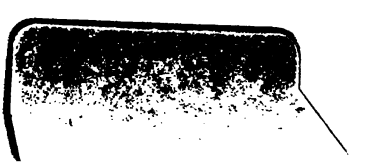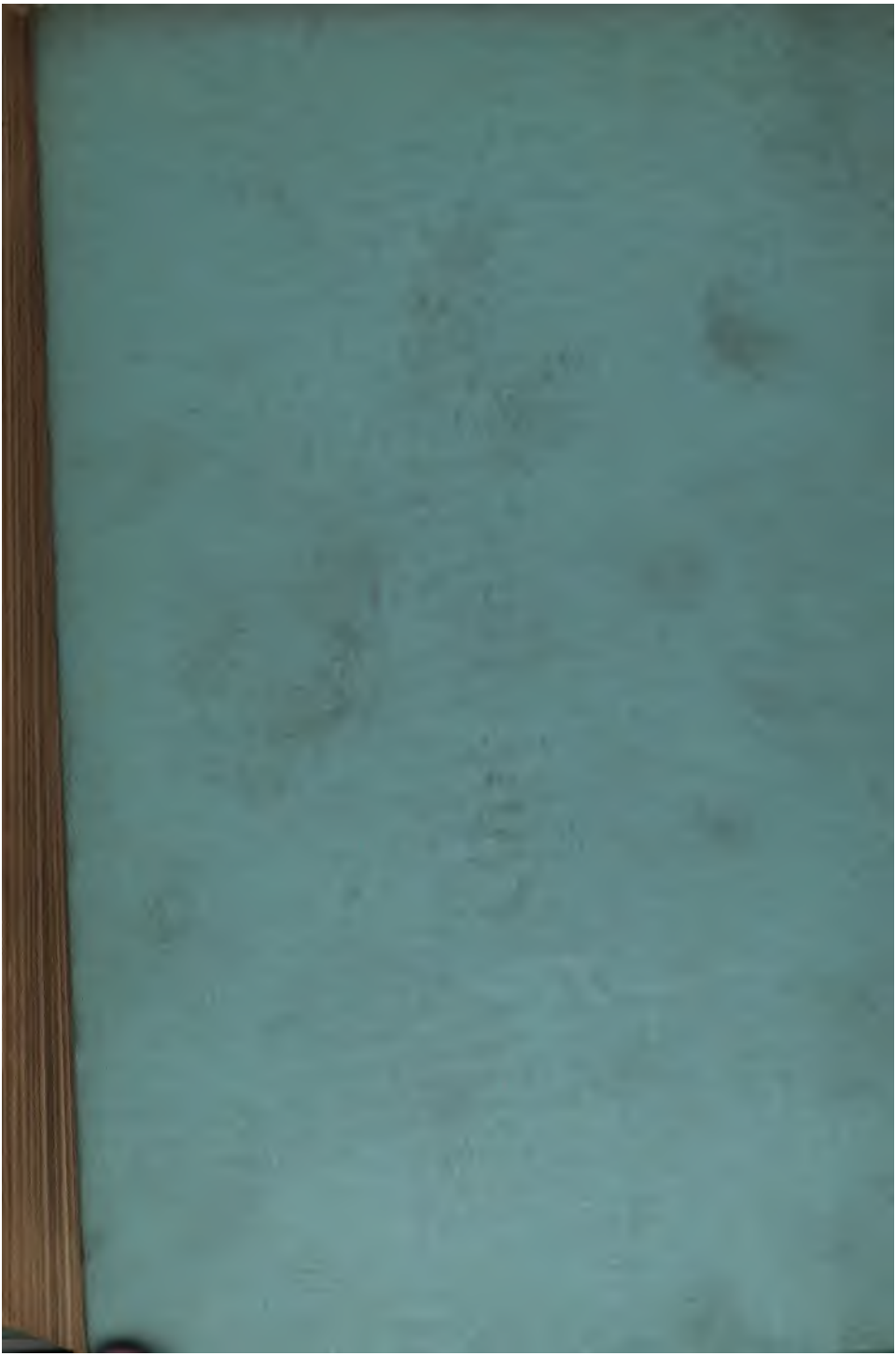
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